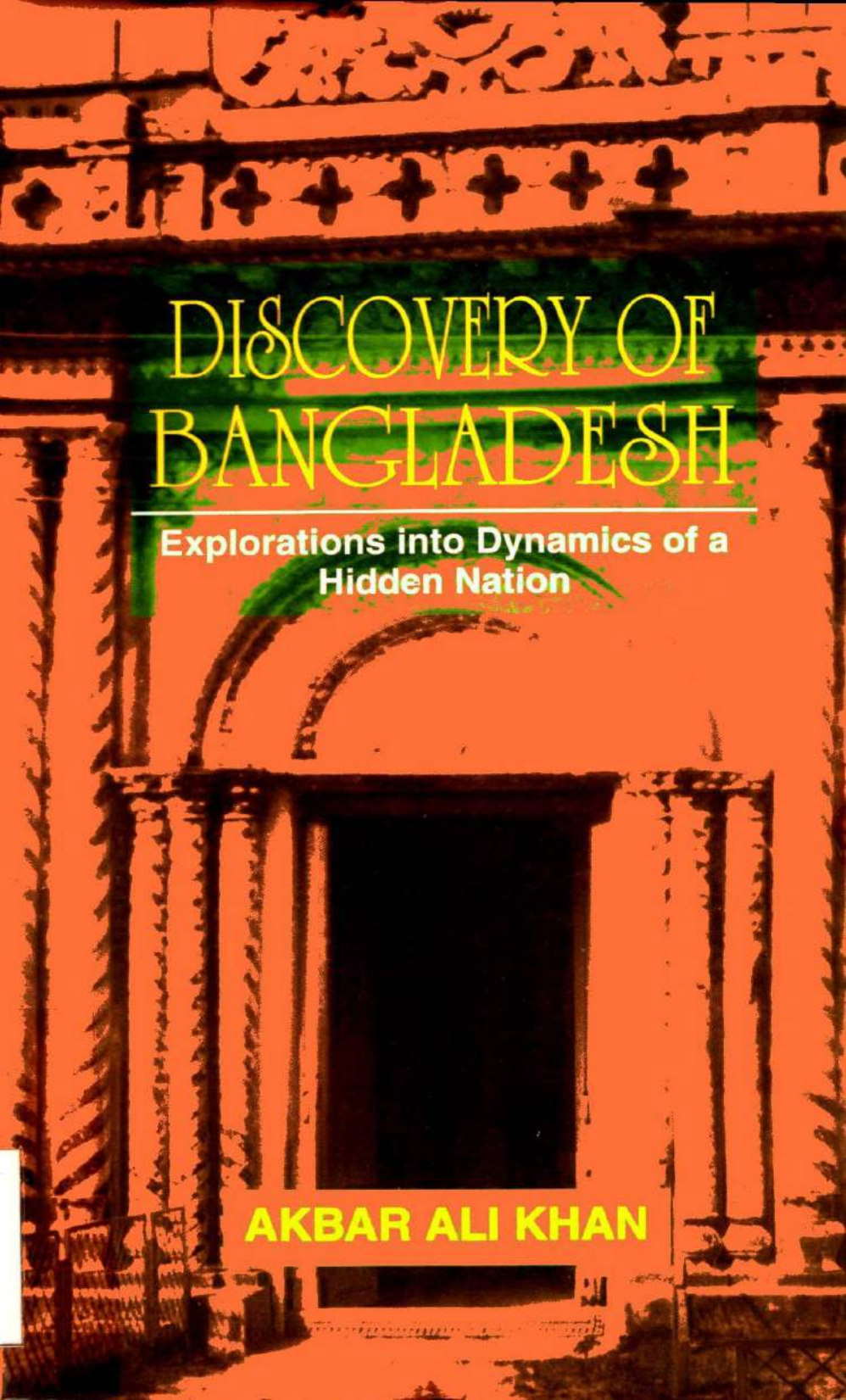
DISCOVERY OF
BANGLADESH
Explorations into Dynamics of a
Hidden Nation
AKBAR ALI KHAN

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Dedicated to

Hajera Khan (my mother)
Jahan Ara Rahman (my mother-in-law)
and
Nahreen Khan (my daughter).

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Glossary

abdal	water-carrier—one of the lowest castes of the Muslims
agradani brahman	degraded brahmans who accept gift on behalf of the ghosts
agrahara	village or land donated by the king for the upkeep of the Brahman
ajlaf	ordinary Muslims, same as atrap
asabiyah	strong clannish spirit popular in pre-Islamic Arabia
ashraf	urdu-speaking Muslim elites in Bengal
babu	common form of address by the Bengali bhadralok, used pejoratively by the British rulers
baidya	upper caste Hindus, traditionally physicians
basunia	rich peasants in Rangpur and Dinajpur districts
bediya	gypsies living in boats
bhadralok	gentlemen, respectable people belonging to Hindu upper castes
bhaiachara	a type of joint village where land is distributed according to size of labour force in a family
brahmadeya	gift to brahman, specifically a grant of village income and management to Brahmans
chandal	low caste Hindu
chotolok	common people
chowkidar	village watchman
daladali	factionalism

darul harb	the abode of the infidel
darul Islam	the abode of Islam
dhimmi	peoples, i.e. Christian and Jews, whose protection was enjoined by the Quran
dhuti	typical Hindu male loin cloth in South Asia
faraidi	A fundamentalist Muslim movement which emphasises the fard or obligatory religious duty
guru	teacher
haoladar	a type of intermediary landholder
jihad	holy war
jotedar	tenure-holder—intermediary between landlords and lower peasants
kayastha	a Hindu sub-caste which included clerks and scribes
lambardar	village head-man
latdar	intermediary landholder in Khulna and Jessore districts
matbar	village elder
mallot	localized variation in nomenclature for samaj
mauza	smallest unit of revenue administration often comprising a village or a number of villages
mlechchha	a sinner and deviant from Hindu way of life
mondol	village leader in north Bengal
mulla	a Muslim religious priest
mummadi	local chief in South India
murubbi	village elder
muvendavelar	local chief in South India
Mymensinghia	immigrant from the Mymensingh district to Assam
nadu	local territory (in Tamil), fundamental building block of rural organization in Chola territory

Panchayat	village council
Paramanik	village leader in Rangpur
patel	hereditary village head-man
pattidari	a form of joint village where land is distributed according to ancestral share
periyanadu	supra-local assembly
pir	Muslim religious saint
pod	Hindu caste engaged in agriculture
potail	patel
raiyatwari	a village headed by a hereditary head-man
reyai	village social group in Comilla
samaj	local village organization of village households
Shalish	courts run by the samaj for resolving disputes
sanatan dharma	eternal faith
sardar	leader
Srotriya brahman	one step short of the purest Brahmins
taiyuni	name given to followers of Maulana Keramat Ali
talukder	holder of a taluk, a landlord lower in tenurial and social status than the zamindar
varna Brahman	inferior Brahmans
yavana	infidels
zamindar	landlords

Preface

In the dark days of the liberation war in 1971 when I was sentenced to fourteen years' rigorous imprisonment by the occupation forces for my participation in the struggle, I used to dream of writing some day a history of the Bangladesh revolution. In the wake of the lovely dawn of freedom, I found the task exceedingly daunting. Like the studies on the French Revolution in the nineteenth century, the history of Bangladesh revolution degenerated into squabbles of contemporary politics. I started having second thoughts about the competence of participants like me in making an objective assessment of the liberation war. I thought that it might be easier to search for the historical roots of this new nation. I presumed that the remoteness of historical events might give me an opportunity to delineate a conceptual framework for Bangladesh Revolution. I found this task also equally frustrating. Methodologically, as Alfred Cobban rightly pointed out, "historians and sociologists are natural enemies". However, the blending of history and sociology was inescapable to explain the historical roots of Bangladesh. Despite the express disdain of the historians for theories, traditional historical methods seem to generate more heat than light. As an economist, I tend to agree with Alfred Marshall that "the most reckless and dangerous theorist is the man who claims to let the facts speak for themselves." I, therefore, prefer explicit theorizing of social scientists to implicit theories of historians. I am fully aware of the fact that such an approach is likely to earn for me more enemies than friends among the historians. Hopefully, explicit theories would clarify the issues in the debate and would be helpful in hammering out the mainstream interpretation even if many of the hypotheses of this study are not accepted.

Though I had been honing the points of departure of this study for last twenty five years, the completion of this book would not have been possible without active encouragement and assistance of Dr. Kamal Siddiqui. He helped me in collecting a lot of research materials for this book. Words are inadequate to express my debt to

him. Mr. A.K.N. Ahmed and Mr. Ziaul Ansar offered helpful suggestions on the drafts at various stages. The trainees of several foundation courses in the Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre raised searching questions about many of the hypotheses of this study which were discussed in my lectures on Bangladesh studies. My sincerest thanks are due to all of them.

I gratefully acknowledge the professional assistance of Mr. Mohiuddin Ahmed of University Press Limited who did a commendable job in publishing the book in the shortest possible time. Thanks are also due to Mr. Tapan K. Chakrabarty of the Ministry of Finance for typing the manuscript with care and deligence.

My wife Hamim had supported me in innumerable ways during last 23 years. I hope that she will have the satisfaction that her sacrifices were not altogether in vain.

Dhaka, November 1996 Akbar Ali Khan

Preface to the revised edition

A postscript has been added to this revised edition. The postscript reviews some of the technical issues which were not elaborated in the original text. However, the original text remains unchanged except for a few editorial changes.

I am deeply grateful to Asiatic Society of Bangladesh for awarding the "Justice Mohammad Ibrahim Gold Medal" for this monograph which was adjudged as the most outstanding work in arts and humanities in Bangladesh in the biennial 1996-98.

Dhaka, 1st February 2001 Akbar Ali Khan

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a latecomer into the world of nation-states. She ranks 133rd among 185 members of the United Nations (as of 1995) in order of the date of admission. The overwhelming majority of states which succeeded Bangladesh are mini-states who have until recently inhabited the by-ways of history. Of the 52 states which were admitted to the UN since her entry, 25 contain less than a million people each; another 17, less than ten million. The combined population of 48 such states is less than that of Bangladesh (about 120 million in 1995). At the time of her birth in 1971, Bangladesh had the eighth largest population in the world. One out of every forty six persons in the world today is a Bangladeshi. Obviously, Bangladesh is the last major nation-state to proclaim its identity.

Bangladesh's birth was not only late but also sudden. She is neither a distinct geographical entity nor a well-defined historical unit. Her political boundaries were demarcated in 1947 by a British arbitrator who was selected primarily because of his ignorance about South Asia (Collins and Lapierre 1975, p. 217). This division was so abrupt that it resulted in what the Bengali poet Annada Shankar Roy ruefully described as "an orgy of division and destruction" (1954, p. 148). The traumatic partition of 1947 did not, however, resolve the dilemma of her nationhood. Bangladesh is the product of double secessions. Here is a nation that changed its statehood twice in less than a quarter of a century. The dramatic emergence of Bangladesh runs counter to conventional tenets of nationalism in South Asia. She does not fit in the stereotype of either territorial nationalism as espoused by the "one-nation theory" nor does she conform to religious nationalism as enunciated in the "two-nation theory" in South Asia. She is not merely what Seton Watson describes as a "new nation" in contradistinction to what is called a "continuous old nation" (1977, p. 6). She is a volatile nation whose roots baffle the historians. Bangladesh, rightly observed an American political scientist, "is a country challenged by contradictions" (Ziring, 1992, p. 1).

Though as a political entity Bangladesh is novel, the term Bangladesh is not in the least new. Tirumulai inscription of Rajendra Cola which was recorded in 1025 *A.D.* describes "Vangladesa" as a land "where rain water never stopped" (Chowdhury 1967, pp. 83-84). The cognate of Bangladesh is "Vanga" which could be traced to Hindu scripture *Aitareya Aranyaka* (composed between 500 B.C. and 500 *A.D.*). Legend has it that Prince Vanga who first colonized Bengal was born out of the union of King Bali's wife Sudeshna with the accursed saint Dirgatama (Sarkar 1392 B.S., p. 222). According to the linguists, the etymological roots of the word *Vanga* may be traced to languages in neighbouring regions. One school of linguists maintains that the word *Vanga* is derived from the Tibetan word "*Bans*" which connotes "wet" and "moist" (Das, 1969, p. 1). According to this interpretation, Bangladesh literally refers to a wetland. Another school is of the opinion that the term "*Bangala*" is derived from *Bodo* (aborigines of Assam) words "*Bang*" and "*la*" which signify "wide plains" (Nath, 1948, p. 17). Yet another explanation came from the sixteenth century Mughal historian Abul Fadl. He wrote: "The original name of Bengal was *Bang*. Its former rulers raised mounds measuring ten yards in height and twenty in breadth throughout the province which was called *al*. From this suffix, the name of Bengal took its rise and currency"(Quoted in Majumder 1943, vol. 1, p. 19). Of the theories advanced so far, the hypothesis of Tibetan origin seems most plausible in view of the fact that the Bengal delta constitutes one of the largest wetlands in the world.

Geographically, Bengal is a distinct unit. As Nihar Ranjan Roy points out, "On the one side very high mountains; on two other sides hard hills and on another side the vast Sea, in the middle the evenness of the plains—this is the geographical destiny of the Bengalees"(1400 BS, p. 71). Curiously, in the ancient and medieval times, the geographical unity of the "Great Bengal" was perceived more clearly by the outsiders than the Bengalees themselves who were mostly scattered in "little Bengals". Ancient inscriptions of the region attest to the existence of a congeries of principalities. There are frequent references to "twelve Bengals" in the medieval *Dharmamangala* literature in Bengal (Sen 1993, vol. 1, p. 12). On the contrary, Gwalior Inscription of the Pratihara King Bhoja I (9th century) alludes to the "Great Bengal" (*Brihada Vangan*)" (Sen 1993, Vol. 1, p. VIII). The Mughal rulers were clearly aware of the vastness of the geographical Bengal. "Bangalah", writes the Mughal

court historian Abul Fadl, "is situated in the second clime (Iqlim) and is four hundred kos in length from Chittagong to Garhi (Teliagarh). It is bounded on the east and north by the mountains, on the south by the Sea, and on the west by the Subah of Bihar. Bordering on the country are Kamrup and Assam" (Quoted in Rahim 1963, vol. I, p.7). Mughal emperor Jahangir in his autobiography also mentioned that total area of Bengal was extensive. He reported that the length of Bengal was 450 kos and breadth 220 kos which indicated that total area of Bengal was around 400,000 square miles—much larger than the combined areas of Bengal Presidency (84,092 square miles) and Bihar and Orissa (111824 square miles). While Jahangir obviously overestimated the area of Bengal, he was, however, right about the vastness of Bengal as a geographical unit.

The "Great Bengal" which was a political reality during the Muslim rule (1201-1757 *A.D.*) was unknown in the ancient times. The political landscape of the zone prior to the Muslim rule was dotted with a multitude of small states. Epigraphic evidence reveals the existence of a mosaic of principalities. The nucleus of many small states might have been provided by the tribes which originally inhabited the region. Roy is of the opinion that Vangah, Radhah, Gaudah and Pundrah are the names of the ancient tribes of Bengal (1400 B.S., p.108). The precise boundaries of the territorial units mentioned in the inscriptions are unknown. Furthermore, these boundaries were not fixed and they varied with political fortunes of these kingdoms. Historical sources refer to three distinct kingdoms which were known as *Vanga*, *Vangala* and *Vangladesha*. These kingdoms were located in south and east Bengal. Apart from these kingdoms, the eastern region also witnessed the rise and fall of the kingdoms of Harikela (probably in Sylhet), Samatata (Comilla area), Pattikera (Comilla area), and Chandradwipa (Barisal area). The western region of Bengal was the home of the kingdoms of Kajangal (south west Bengal), Tamralipti (Medinipur), Suhmabhumi (parts of Burdwan, Hugli and Howrah) and Radha (West Bengal) which was sometimes fragmented into Uttara Radha (north west Bengal) and Dakshin Radha (south west Bengal). The central Bengal was the political arena of the kingdoms of Pundravardhana (Bogra, Dinajpur and Rajshahi areas), Varendra (Rajshahi area), Gauda (Murshidabad, Birbhum, Maldah and Burdwan) and Karna Subarna (Murshidabad area).

The "little Bengals" of the ancient times were welded into a "Great Bengal" by the Muslim rulers. Even before the Muslims

invaded Bengal, there had been abortive attempts by king Sasanka (7th century) and the Pala rulers (750-1162 A.D.) to unite Bengal. Political unity in Bengal, however, could not be sustained before the establishment of the Muslim rule. Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah (1342-1357 *A.D.*) not only united different areas of Bengal but also christened the united kingdom as "Bangala". He himself assumed the title *Shah-i-Banglah* (King of Bangalah). Despite occasional spurts of centrifugal forces, political unity of Bengal largely survived since the fourteenth century. It was further strengthened by the Mughal rulers who incorporated the province of Bengal into the Delhi-based empire. Political unity forged by the Muslim rulers also promoted linguistic homogeneity. Unlike their Hindu and Buddhist predecessors, the Muslim rulers in Bengal were ardent patrons of Bengali language and literature. Prior to Muslim rule, the Bengali vernacular was despised for its impurities and vulgarities by Hindu elites who proscribed the teaching of the Sanskrit to the lower castes. The spread of Islam challenged the spiritual leadership of upper caste Hindus. The intense competition between Islam and resurgent Hinduism in the form of Vaishnavism for capturing the imagination of unlettered masses resulted in an outpouring of their stirring messages in the vernacular.

The British inherited a politically united and culturally homogeneous Bengal. The centralized *Pax Britannica* in South Asia not only consolidated the nascent unity of Bengal but also placed her in the hub of the political and cultural life of the subcontinent. As Chaudhuri rightly points out: "The Bengalis themselves were not important in political, military or economical life, and at their most ambitious they sought minor posts and functions in the Muslim administration. But all this changed suddenly and drastically with the establishment of British rule. Bengal became the political centre of India, and due to the introduction of education through English, the cultural centre as well. For the first time in the historic existence of the Bengali people, that is to say, of a people who could be distinguished clearly from the rest of the Hindus in India as a human group with an identity of its own, there came to them the opportunity to play a major role in the history of their country and also to obtain highest worldly positions open to Indians" (1987, p.663). In the nineteenth century, the Bengali elite used to boast: "What Bengal thinks today, the rest of India will think tomorrow". The Bengali historians claimed that the ancient Bengalis were the architects of

civilization not only in Bengal but also in the Ceylon, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and other parts of India (Sen, 1993; Das 1984). In this political and cultural environment, the political elite in Bengal was enthralled by what Chaudhuri described as "megalomania" (Chaudhuri: 1402 B.S.).

Throughout history, the Bengal zone had known either one Great Bengal or many little Bengals. But the partition of Bengal into two political entities in 1947 was a sudden twist in her history. The broad division of Bengal into the East and West is not altogether unknown in historical sources. Vatsayana, the author of *Kama Sutra* (circa 3rd/4th century *A.D.*), refers to Gauda and Vanga as two separate entities. Ibn Batutah who travelled to Bengal in the fourteenth century, refers to kingdoms of Lakhnawti and Bangalah which roughly correspond to West and East Bengal (Rahim, 1963). The Mughal court historian Abul Fadl mentions mutually exclusive "Bhati" (low country) and "Bangla" regions which approximate respectively to Bangladesh and West Bengal (Eaton 1994, pp. 145-146.). These divisions were not, however, precursors of the partition of Bengal in 1947. These political entities were short-lived and did not leave behind any common memory of achievements and sacrifice. For example, Morrison suggests that Bengal in the pre-Muslim period was divided into four virtually independent political divisions (1969). The partition of Bengal in 1947 was not the culmination of any inevitable, historical process. Bangladesh did not, therefore, evolve as what Hans Kohn described as "a great corporate personality of history" (Kohn 1945, p. 329).

Broadly speaking, there are two competing theories on the origins of nationalism: (i) primordial, and (ii) instrumental. While the primordialists believe that nations are born, the instrumentalists maintain that nations are made. According to primordial view, the essence of a nation is psychological. This essence is a "psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other people in a most vital way"(Connor 1978, p. 379). Primordial attachment is defined as "one that stems from the givens or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed givens—of social existence, immediate contiguity and kin-connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices". These attachments

constitute the givens of human conditions and are "rooted in non-rational foundations of personality"(Geertz 1963, p. 147). Primordial attachments are not however always real; sometimes they are perceived. The perception of primordial attachment is very often based on what Breuilly described as "uniqueness historicism" which postulates that uniqueness of each nation is vindicated by history. Nationalist historicism is not actual history, it is an appeal to history to justify that the nation is defined by the past. As Breuilly explains: "History is not evidence on which theories could be tested or a charter drawn up from which to justify present decisions. It is not a constraint on the present or a rich profusion of the various forms human nature has assumed. Rather it is the only way to apprehend the spirit of a community, it is the principal way of learning the language of a particular society" (Breuilly 1981, p. 334).

The instrumental theory of nationalism challenges the view that nations are inscribed into the nature of things, and nation-states are the manifest ultimate destiny of ethnic or cultural groups. There are several approaches to instrumental interpretation of nationalism (Hutchinson and Smith, 1994). While recognizing the importance of culture in nationalist movements, Gellner argues that cultural identity does not create nationalism; on the contrary, it is the need of modern societies for cultural homogeneity that creates nationalism. In his words, "it is nationalism which engenders nations and not the other way round." The urge for nationalism arises from the transition of agro-literate society which is based on folk culture to industrial society dominated by high culture. The efficient functioning of an industrial society is contingent on the easy mobility of a homogeneous labour force with similar education, training and outlook (high culture). Nationalism in his view, is "essentially the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority and, in some cases, the totality of the population"(Gellner 1993).

Tom Nairn (1977) suggests that nationalism originates in threatened and underdeveloped societies where the intelligentsias mobilize the masses around its development goals. The Marxist historian Eric Hobsawm (1983) maintains that even in Europe, the nation was invented by political elites in order to legitimize their power. Paul R. Brass (1979) concluded that despite the constraints of pre-existing cultures or religious practices of ethnic groups, particular elite groups manipulate cultural symbols to create political

identities. Anderson (1992) also regards the nation-state as an artifact, "an imagined political community".

Both "primordialist" and "instrumentalist" positions seem to be extreme; the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes. However, an analysis of the historiography of Bangladesh indicates a predilection of much of the studies towards instrumental interpretation. There are four major instrumental schools on the origins of Bangladesh. According to one school, the emergence of Bangladesh is viewed as the culmination of divide and rule policy of the British *Raj* (Addy and Azad, 1975). Another school maintains that the evolution of Bangladesh was the reaction against the economic deprivation (Sobhan 1992). In a similar vein, Mallick and Husain concluded: the identity assertion of Bangladesh was essentially "a reaction of a marginalized community in quest of its due share in economic and political milieu" (1992, p. 550). A third school portrays the emergence of Bangladesh as the outcome of elite conflicts (Broomfield 1992). Finally, the emergence of Bangladesh is very often viewed as the result of Pakistan's failure in national integration rather than the culmination of a long drawn historical process (Jahan 1994; Maniruzzaman 1980).

The primordial interpretation of nationalism in Bangladesh was mainly articulated in the speeches of the nationalist leaders. It has not been as yet fully developed into a coherent theory. Nevertheless, primordial basis of nationhood in Bangladesh is assumed to be a reality. For example, Ziring writes: "The Bengalis of East Pakistan has declared and demonstrated their intention to form a nation based upon their peculiar cultural and historical heritage. Nationhood gave societal expression to what had always been a distinct consciousness. There was no need, as in so many other twentieth century countries, to integrate a disparate people. Cultural fusion had already succeeded. The Bengalis were a community prior to their demand for self-determination" (Ziring 1992, p. 2). Another historian maintains that "the history of Bangladesh nationalism begins where all histories begin, i.e. in the midst of prehistory" (Osmany 1992, p. 1.)

There are two factors which impeded full-scale development of a primordial interpretation of nationalism in Bangladesh. Such an interpretation presupposes an unalterable base of nationhood. In case of Bangladesh the base of nationhood suddenly shifted from religious nationalism to linguistic nationalism.

The shift in the base of nationalism generated the current controversy over Bengali versus Bangladeshi nationalism. The proponents of Bangladeshi nationalism underline the Islamic identity of the Bengalis in Bangladesh vis-a-vis in the neighbouring state of West Bengal (Osmany 1992, p. 145). The Bengali nationalism on the other hand glorifies the secular and linguistic heritage of Bengal (Ahmed, 1994). However, no theory has been advanced as yet to reconcile the contradictory strands of nationhood in Bangladesh.

The second impediment to a primordial interpretation of nationalism in Bangladesh is the widespread belief that both politically and culturally Bangladesh is an integral part of greater South Asian civilization. As Chatterjee points out, during last hundred years, there has been a 'tidal wave of historical memory about *Arya-Hindu Bharatavarsa'* that asserts the singularity as well as classical origins of the history of India (Chatterjee 1993, p. 115). The political history of Bangladesh is viewed as inextricably intertwined with the north-India based empires. Starting with the mighty *Gangaridai* empire in the latter half of the fourth century B.C. which reportedly scared away Alexander, the Great from India, Bangladesh region, according to this interpretation, had been successively ruled by the Maurya empire (4th to 2nd century B.C.), the Gupta Empire (4th-5th century A.D.), the empire of Sasanka (7th century *A.D.*), the Pala empire (8th to 12th century A.D.), the Sena Kingdom (12th and 13th century), Delhi Sultanate (13th to 15th century), Mughal empire (16th to 18th century) and the *Pax Britannica*. Specially the Pala empire which lasted for more than four hundred years and reached its zenith in eighth and ninth centuries under the leadership of Dharmapala and Devapala is cited as an example of Bengal's political genius in empire-building.

From the cultural point of view, Bengal is often viewed as an inseparable part of the Great Indian Tradition. It is postulated that consciousness of a common culture in South Asia "provides the source for the communication between Little and Great cultural traditions and for the formation of a world view, value system, and personality type characteristic of a civilization as a whole in spite of the many internal differences and changes" (Singer 1972, p. 7). From both political and cultural points of view, Bangladesh is not, therefore, classified as a distinct historical unit.

Both these premises are, however, wrong. The unitary-imperial interpretation of history of Bangladesh is not corroborated by

historical evidence. The canonical interpretation overstates the role of all-India empires in the political life of Bangladesh region. Epigraphic evidence suggests that only some of the areas which now constitute Bangladesh were occasionally incorporated in the larger empires of South Asia (see Table 1).

Table 1. A comparison of unitary-imperial and fragmentary - local interpretation of Bangladesh history

Period	Unitary-imperial interpretation	Fragmentary-local interpretation
Latter half of 4th century BC	the emergence of mighty *Gaugaridai*-empire.	The precise boundary of *Gangaridai* is unknown. It is usually presumed to be located to the east of the Ganges and the Bhagirathi. It is unlikely to be a very large empire.
321-185 BC	The Maurya empire. There is direct evidence of Maurya occupation of north Bengal and indirect evidence of Maurya influence in other areas.	The Maurya political suzerainty was confined to north Bengal only.
1st and 2nd Century *A.D.*	The Kushana coins have been discovered. This region might have been occupied by the Kushans.	There is no direct evidence to prove that Bengal was a part of the Kushana empire.
331-650 A.D.	Bengal formed a part of the Gupta Empire	There is evidence of direct Gupta suzerainty in north Bengal. But East Bengal occasionally paid tribute. Nevertheless, there is evidence of independent kingdom in West Bengal (Pushakara) and indepeadent kingdom in Faridpur as mentioned in Kotalipara inscription (circa 500-600 *A.D.*)
600-650 *A.D.*	The Gauda Empire of Sasanka	East Bengal was not a part of the Gauda empire as evidenced by the existence of Bhadra dynasty.
650-750 *A.D.*	The Period of anarchy	Independent Khadaga dynasty ruled East Bengal during 650-700 *A.D.*

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Period	Unitary-imperial interpretation	Fragmentary-local interpretation
750-1162 *A.D.*	The Pala empire which lasted for about four hundred years was a large north Indian empire.	The Pala empire was primarily confined to Bihar and certain areas of north Bengal. Except a short interregnum (1043-1075 A.D.) in the eleventh century, much of Bangladesh region remained outside the orbit of the Pala empire. All the inscriptions of early Pala rulers were issued from Bihar and lands granted by them were located in Bihar or parts of northern Bengal. The last Pala king ruled in Bihar and not in Bengal. These clearly suggest that the base of Pala empire lay in Bihar. Furthermore, epigraphic evidence on the following sovereign kingdoms attest to political independence of Bangladesh region: 1. Khadaga dynasty, 650-700 *A.D.* 2. Nath and Rata dynasty, 700-750 *A.D.* 3. Deva dynasty, 750-800 *A.D.* 4. Harikela dynasty, 800-900 A. D. 5. Chandra dynasty, 900-1040 *A.D.* 6. The Varmans, 1080-1150 *A.D.* 7. Pattikera dynasty, 1000-1100 *A.D.*
1160-1206 *A.D.*	The Senas established an empire on the whole of Bengal.	The Sena kingdom was based in Bengal and was not a north-India based empire.
1204-1757 *A.D.*	Delhi based Muslim empires under various dynasties extended their sway to Bengal.	Out of about 550 years of Muslim rule, Bengal was effectively ruled for 200 years by Delhi-based all-India empires. For about 350 years, Bengal remained effectively independent.

Source: 1. For unitary-imperial interpretation, Majumder (1943)
2. For local-fragmentary interpretation, Chowdhury (1967)

According to the revisionist interpretation of Bangladesh history, political fragmentation and not empire was the historical destiny of Bangladesh region in ancient and medieval times. Inscriptions indicate the existence of a succession of independent kingdoms in southern and eastern Bengal. These local kingdoms included the realms of Vainyagupta (6th century), the Faridpur kings (6th century), the Bhadra dynasty (600-650 *A.D.*), Khadaga dynasty (650-700 *A.D.*),

Natha and Rata dynasties (750-800 *A.D.*), the rulers of Harikela (800-900 *A.D.*), Chandra dynasty (900-1045 *A.D.*), Varman dynasty (1080-1150 *A.D.*) and Pattikera dynasty (1000-1150 A.D.). Effective political unity was first imposed on Bengal by the Muslim rulers. Nevertheless, Bengal was practically independent for about 350 out of 550 years of Muslim rule.

Culturally, the Great Tradition of Indian civilization extended to Bengal. Redfield and Singer pointed out: "Embodied in sacred books or 'classics', sanctified by a cult, expressed in monuments, sculpture, painting and architecture, served by the arts and sciences, the Great Tradition becomes the core culture of an indigenous civilization and a source, consciously examined, for defining its moral, legal, aesthetic and other cultural norms. A Great Tradition describes a way of life and as such is a vehicle and standard for those who share it to identify with one another as members of a common civilization" (Quoted in Singer, 1972, p. 7). However, the hold of the Great Tradition had been significantly weaker in Bengal region than in other areas of South Asia. Historically, the region had been a nursery of heresies, heterodoxies and esoterism. Nevertheless, these cults were reconciled as little culture within the paradigm of Great Tradition. The preponderance of Muslim population in Bengal further eroded the Great Tradition which usually neutralized alien or folk culture either through "Sanskritization" (a process which brings groups outside Hinduism in its fold and non-Hindu groups are Hinduized by becoming castes and the status of the lower castes is raised up) or compartmentalization (a process that incorporates new groups and clans into the civilization as sub-castes with their distinctive ways of life and thought). Despite syncretization of Islam with little culture at the grass-roots level, the Muslims of Bengal remained totally outside the orbit of the Great Tradition of India; they could neither be "sanskritized" nor "compartmentalized". On the contrary, the Islamic revivalist movements drew the Muslims of Bengal into the Great Islamic Tradition which not only resisted "Indianization" of Islam but also promoted the purge of folk elements from Islam in Bengal(Roy, 1983). The Islamic revivalist movements provided the bedrock of religious nationalism that surfaced in the 1940s.

While theology inspired religious nationalism, historicism permeated territorial nationalism in Bangladesh. Historicism is not based on what actually happened in the past, it is based on doctrines and ideas which are presumed to be supported by history. Three strands of

historicism animated territorial nationalism in Bangladesh. These are the pride in the "indomitable Bengal", the memory of the affluence of the "Golden Bengal" and doting adulation for the "sweetest" mother tongue.

One of the received doctrines in the canonical interpretation of history of Bengal is that this country had always been a land of rebels which had defied the dominance of successive north-India empires. It is postulated that this fierce spirit of independence in this region was nurtured by geographical isolation and distinctiveness. Separated by mountains, hills and forests, Bengal was a world unto herself. Her geographical isolation was further reinforced by innumerable rivers which criss-crossed the deltaic areas. Bengal thus provided a safe haven to political rebels who time and again revolted against the alien rulers. This image of the indomitable Bengal was invoked to whip up hatred against foreign rule. The notion of indomitable Bengal is, however, exaggerated. First, revolt against the centre is not in the least unique to Bengal. It had always been rife in all regions of South Asia. Secondly, this interpretation assumes that Bengal had always been a monolithic political entity. Historical evidence indicates that Bengal was always politically fragmented. Bengal not only revolted against Delhi, she was a house divided against herself. The most striking fact in the political history of this region is not frequent revolts against the central rule in the north but the absence of central authority in Bengal itself.

The resurrection of the "Golden age" is one of the fondest dreams of the nationalists throughout the developing countries. Apalled by the disparities between the standard of living in developing and industrial countries, the nationalist leaders in the less developed societies evoked the image of a golden age in their history which is usually not in the disagreeable recent past, but in a more remote past, and is defined and corroborated by historicism. The dream of the restoration of a "Golden age" is the defence mechanism for safeguarding the self-esteem of nations blighted by stark deprivation. There are two underlying assumptions in the "Golden Bengal" hypothesis which inspired the nationalists in Bangladesh. First, it is postulated that Bengal enjoyed uninterrupted economic prosperity before the establishment of the British rule in India. This implies that Bengal was free from famines, poverty and the sufferings inflicted by economic cycles. Secondly, Bengal in the pre-British era was more prosperous than other adjoining contemporary societies.

An analysis of the historical sources does not support the hypothesis that Bengal in the pre-British era was a Shangrila (Khan, 1992). It was a typical pre-industrial society with a fragile economic base which was highly vulnerable to the whims of nature. The natural presumption is that transitory distresses occurred periodically; famine was not, therefore, altogether unknown to the so-called Golden Bengal. Furthermore, there were deep pockets of chronic poverty across the country. The existence of slavery clearly indicates that destitution was wide-spread. The purchasing power of the people in the region was limited. Available evidence on the price of slaves in Bengal suggests that wage in the pre-British Bengal was likely to be low. This hypothesis is supported by qualitative and quantitative evidence on poverty of the weavers. In the so-called Golden Bengal, gold or silver coins were not the usual medium of exchange in day to day transactions. The common people used to earn, buy and sell in *cowries*. Gold and silver coins were used mainly for payment of revenue. The legendary cheapness of prices in Bengal resulted not from the oversupply of goods and services, but from the lack of purchasing power. Viewed in this perspective, cheap prices in the pre-British Bengal reflect the misery and not prosperity of common people. The Golden Bengal was not, therefore, *golden* in the absolute sense. Available evidence does not, however, altogether reject the hypothesis that despite limitations, the pre-British Bengal was better-off compared to many contemporary pre-industrial societies. *A priori,* there are reasons to presume that Bengal was relatively more prosperous than many other areas of Asia. Because of abundance of water, droughts in Bengal were less devastating than in other parts of Asia. Despite the overwhelming evidence against its absolute version which presents pre-British Bengal as a land of cheapness and plenty, the historicism of "Golden Bengal" is deeply rooted in the Bangladeshi psyche.

According to romantic nationalists, language mirrors the national soul. Each language is, therefore, viewed as the manifestation of its unique values and ideas. Language is, therefore considered as one of the basic ingredients of nationhood. It is not, therefore, surprising that nationalism in Bangladesh was nurtured by an emotional attachment to language. Ziring (1992) maintains that "Bengali love affair with their language involves a passionate ritual that produces emotional experiences seldom found in other parts of the world". He suggests two reasons for the uniqueness of attachment of the

Bengalis to their own language. First a poor nation is likely to hold tenaciously to cultural heritage as the mooring of its national identity. Cultural hauteur is the counterpoise to material inferiority. Secondly, in Ziring's view, geography and climate also shaped the emotional attachment to language in Bangladesh. He argues that the annual monsoon which inundates vast areas of the country each year brings life to a standstill. In this environment, "Bengalis pass the rainy season huddled together in small groups, riding out the torrential downpour in virtual isolation sustained only by recitations and songs that fill the time, waiting for rains to subside and waters to recede". Obviously, Ziring's hypothesis seems to be oversimplified. Love of the Bengali language is not confined either to the poor or to the rural areas which are inundated by the monsoon. Emotional attachment to language is much more pronounced in the urban areas where the effects of the monsoon are limited.

There are three major limitations of the theory that interprets nationalism in Bangladesh purely on linguistic basis. First, during the Pakistan movement, the majority of Bangladeshis opted for an union with their coreligionists who spoke in a different tongue. There is obviously a dichotomy between language and religion in this region. Secondly, Bengali language is not unique to Bangladesh. It is shared with West Bengal and other areas in eastern India. In fact, Calcutta in West Bengal was the seat of Bengali culture during last two hundred years. As Novak argues: "Though it is anathema to say so in today's Bangladesh, the truth is that the high literary tradition of Bangla was carefully developed in the late nineteenth century mostly by Hindus, who used Bangla to help impart to their province the sense of identity of a modern state in the European style"(Novak 1993, p. 143). Finally, the overwhelming majority of the population in Bangladesh are unlettered. They are unlikely to be emotionally obsessed with language. Linguistic narcissism is confined mainly to the urban elites.

The foregoing analysis indicates that the primordial interpretation of territorial nationalism in Bangladesh is based on half-truths and myths. The birth of Bangladesh reaffirmed the partition of a distinct geographical unit and division of a homogeneous ethno-linguistic community. Neither part of the divided Bengal has exclusive claim over Bengal's rich cultural heritage.

Religious nationalism based on two-nation theory unleashed the historical forces which led to partition of Bengal. The swing of public opinion towards religious nationalism was, however, short-lived.

"The existence of a nation", rightly observed Renan, "is an everyday plebiscite, it is like the very existence of an individual, a perpetual affirmation of life" (1994, p. 17). By this criterion, religious nationalism has already been repudiated by the people of Bangladesh through the process of a sanguinary liberation war in 1971. From the theological point of view also, Islamic nationalism is a contradiction in terms. Islam believes in universal brotherhood of all Muslims and not in the division of the *Ummah* in different nationalities.

The most difficult challenge before the historians of Bangladesh is to reconcile the contradictions arising from the shifting bases of nationhood. Explanations on the dramatic about-face in the tortuous search for Bangladesh's identity differ. The easiest explanation is that Bangladesh nationalism is *sui-generis* (unique of its kind). As Kabir argues, "The quick series of shift in the prominence of religion and language in Bangladesh is bewildering. Perhaps Bangladesh is a unique case of such shifting patterns of communal identity" (1994, p.213). The advantage of this hypothesis is that it does not require any proof; the burden of proof lies on those who want to disprove it.

According to a second school of historians, religious and territorial nationalisms are two stages in the evolution of nationhood in Bangladesh. "Whereas the pre-1947 nationalism was cloaked under the religious and/or communal surplice, the post-1947 nationalism was entirely secular" (Mallick and Husain 1992, p. 551). This theory oversimplifies the dichotomy between religious and territorial loyalties in Bangladesh. Territorial and religious loyalties existed side by side in the minds of the people of Bangladesh. Secular territorial nationalism did not succeed or replace religious nationalism, they vied with each other for winning the hearts of the people.

Ahmed maintains that "there are certain particular traits in the way of life and culture of the Bengali people which have marked them out as a distinct nation" (1994, p. 13). These traits are identified as emotionalism, primacy of the spirit of religion over outward external rituals and the deviation from traditional Hinduism since ancient times. This theory does not, however, explain how these traits developed. Nationalism is everywhere a powerful emotional force. Nationalism in Bangladesh cannot, therefore, be explained in terms of emotionalism alone. The roots of emotionalism have to be explained.

A summary of the existing literature indicates that no satisfactory explanation for primordial nationalism in Bangladesh has been

expounded as yet. It may be hypothesised that nationalism in Bangladesh is not at all deeply rooted in history. The search for primordial origin of nationhood in Bangladesh, may, therefore, be futile. Marc Bloch rightly warned about the dangers of "idol of origins": "The explanation of the very recent in terms of the remote past, naturally attractive to men who have made of this past, their chief subject of research, has dominated our studies to the point of a hypnosis. In its most characteristic aspect, the idol of historian may be called the obsession with origins" (1953, p. 29). Furthermore, it is not always correct to presume that the gestation of nationalism is always too long. Max Weber (1948) maintained that nationalism in the oriental countries may surface within a short space of time.

The hypothesis of the recentness of nationalism in Bangladesh is not consistent with historical facts. The nationhood in Bangladesh may be new. The dichotomy of territorial and extra-territorial loyalties which caused the flip-flops in Bangladesh's search for identity is, not, however at all new. The split personality of Bengal Muslims could be traced as early as the fourteenth century. The spread of Islam in Bengal region generated an identity crisis. The Muslims believe that every letter of the Holy Quran was directly dictated by God. No authorised translation of the Holy Quran is permissible. It was, therefore, essential for those who accepted the Quran as the word of God to understand its language. In reality, however, the overwhelming majority of people in far-flung areas like Bangladesh did not at all know Arabic. On the contrary, the translation of Islamic teachings in the vernacular of Bengal region was not considered desirable because the Bengali language was born and nurtured in the cultural environment of Hinduism. It is not, therefore, surprising that in the early Bengali literature composed by the Muslim writers, the words "Hindu" and "Hinduism" were used interchangeably with Bengali language (Shahidullah 1967, p. 246). Despite the limitations of Bengali language, the rendering of Islamic teachings into vernacular was inescapable to disseminate the message of Islam among the unlettered masses.

This conflict between the faith and the habitat can be traced to Shah Muhammad Saghir, the earliest Muslim writer in Bengali language. Saghir was a contemporary of Sultan Ghiasuddin Azam Shah whose reign lasted from 1389 to 1416 A.D. In his epic on the Muslim legend of "Yusuf Jolekha", he mentions that the writers are afraid to translate the message of Holy scriptures into Bengali. He, however,

maintained that this fear is unfounded. "In my view", said Saghir, "it is not true to say that language changes the message. I have heard wise men saying that mother tongue is a jewel in the treasure-house of languages" (Quoted in Huq, 1957, p. 59).

The writings of Muslim poets in medieval Bengal are replete with apologetics for composition in Bengali. These apologetics may be classified into four categories. One school of Muslim writers tried to justify the use of Bengali language on the basis of doctrine of necessity. The sixteenth century poet Muzammil stated that he composed in Bengali because the people did not understand Arabic language. "Whatever the people might say", argues the poet, " I have already written. I cannot refute whether one calls it good or bad" (Huq 1957, p. 67). In the same vein, Abdul Hakim (1620-1690 A.D.) observed that Arabic is the best medium for expounding the Islamic teachings. He adds that the Persian language can be the second best for this purpose if one does not know Arabic and in case one does not know either the Arabic or the Persian, one should read the scriptures at least in the vernacular (Shahidullah 1374 B.S., p. 138). The second school justifies the use of Bengali on the basis of balance of convenience. Both Syed Sultan (circa 1550-1648 A.D.) and Shaikh Muttalib (1595-1660 A.D.) offered this justification. As Shaikh Muttalib explains, "I have rendered Muslim scriptures into Bengali and certainly I have committed grave sins by doing this. I have, however, a hope in my heart that the faithful will pray for me for getting an opportunity to understand scriptures. Because of the blessings of the faithful, the compassionate Allah will forgive my sins". (Quoted in Huq 1957, p. 198). Similar explanation was offered by Syed Sultan, who was criticised by the Muslim orthodoxy as a hypocrite for writing in Bengali (Huq 1957, p. 161). The third school boldly proclaimed that all languages were comprehensible to God and there is no reason for being apologetic about the use of Bengali language. Abdul Hakim, the seventeenth century poet argued: "The Lord understands all languages, Indian, Bangladeshi or in any other form. Only those who cannot reach various heights of spiritualism hates the Hindu (Bengali) language". On the basis of this argument, he proudly proclaimed, "There are doubts about the parentage of those who, though born in Bengal, hates Bengali language. Those who are not satisfied with the knowledge in the mother tongue should migrate to other countries. Those who are settled in Bengal for generations are likely to be benefited from the advice in

the mother tongue". Finally, a few writers like Muhammad Fasih (17th century) wrote Bengali in the Arabic script hoping that this would be more acceptable to Allah (Huq, 1957, p. 215). In the seventeenth century, *Maqtul Husain*—a Bengali tract was written in the Arabic script.

The wide variety of apologetics for the use of Bengali illustrates the intensity and depth of the conflict between the habitat and faith that tormented the Muslims of Bengal during last six hundred years. The tortuous shifts in the bases of nationhood in Bangladesh are not, therefore, at all surprising; these are deeply rooted in her past. The dichotomy of religion and language is not, however, unique to Muslims in Bangladesh. Similar contradictions surfaced among non-Arab Muslims throughout the world.

The existing literature on the history of Bangladesh underplays not only the inner contradictions of the Muslims of Bengal but also two other significant features of her past. First, unlike other areas of north India, territories which now constitute Bangladesh were not the seats of the mighty empires. Large-scale political institutions on local initiatives were unknown to Bangladesh region; they were occasionally imposed from outside. They, however, disintegrated whenever outside military support failed. The political evolution of Bangladesh region deviated significantly from that of neighbouring Bihar and Assam. Bihar witnessed the emergence of large empires like the Nandas, Mauryas, Guptas and Palas in the ancient period. In Assam, the militarist Ahom rulers succeeded in building a strong empire which lasted for about six hundred years (13th century to 19th century A.D.). Similarly other regions of South Asia also experienced the rise of large empires in different phases of their history. By contrast, political entities in Bengal particularly in the East and South were always small and short-lived.

Secondly, Bangladesh is an island of Muslim majority in the sea of Hinduism. The Muslim majority areas in north west India are physically contiguous to the larger world of Islam in the Middle East. The proportion of the Muslims are insignificant in areas around Bangladesh. The census of 1911 reports that Muslims constituted only 10.6 percent population in Bihar and Orissa and 28.1 percent in Assam. By contrast, more than two thirds of the population in east Bengal were Muslims (see Table 2). The existing literature focuses on how Islam was spread in Bengal. It however, fails to explain why the success of Islamic proselytization varied from region to region.

Table 2. Percentage of Muslim population in India by province, 1911

	Area	Percentage of Muslim population
1.	India	21.0%
2.	Ajmer-Marwar	16.1%
3.	Assam	28.1%
4.	Baluchistan	91.0%
5.	Bengal	52.7%
	a. West Bengal	13.4%
	b. Central Bengal	48.8%
	c. North Bengal	59.0%
	d. East Bengal	68.8%
6.	Bihar and Orissa	10.6%
7.	Bombay	20.4%
8.	Central Province and Berar	18.9%
9.	Coorg	7.4%
10.	Madras	0.7%
11.	N.W.F.P.	92.8%
12.	Punjab	54.8%
13.	United Province of Agra and Oudh	14.0%

Source : E.A. Gait, *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. I.

There are two major weaknesses of the existing literature on the history of Bangladesh. First because of the implicit assumption about the singularity of the history of India, significant regional variations in South Asian history are largely ignored. As a whole, the historians are usually indifferent to the potentialities of comparative analysis. This is particularly true about the historians of Bangladesh. The failure of historians to undertake comparative analysis of life in neighbouring regions of Bangladesh has resulted in total lack of appreciation of the uniqueness of Bangladesh's history. There is an urgent need for the rectification of this weakness. As one of the protagonists of comparative analysis of historical change rightly suggests, "Clearly, history is too important to be left to professional historians alone" (Lorwin 1965, p.603).

Secondly, historians in South Asia are preoccupied with the great unitary states and altogether overlook the grass-roots institutions. Consequently, there is no micro foundation for macro history. What Burton Stein observed about South India is equally valid about the

history of Bangladesh, "Actually, only two levels of government have been dealt with. There are the King with 'his' military and 'his' bureaucratic organisations, and the local level. Linkages between these two levels are poorly defined, for the most part, they are inferred. In some cases linkages are altogether ignored" (1994, p.255).

This study seeks to provide the missing perspective on Bangladesh history by comparing the micro and macro institutions which evolved in and around areas which now constitute Bangladesh with those of other regions in South Asia. The point of departure for this study is that Bangladesh's identity was nurtured in a social and economic environment which was significantly different from other regions of South Asia. The identity crisis that surfaced in the recent decades in Bangladesh is not at all novel. Authority—political, social and religious—in this region had always been weaker than in other areas of the subcontinent. Ironically, the weaknesses of her social institutions which set Bangladesh apart as a distinct region also impeded the articulation of a well-defined identity.

Though Bangladesh is not a distinct natural zone[1], she occupies the heart of a separate region from the institutional point of view. Compared to counterparts in the rest of South Asia, the institutions in this region at both grass-roots and macro levels were feeble. The vitality of all her institutions were undermined by extreme individualism. Life in the region was characterized by an isolation paradox because individuals found it profitable to act in isolation rather than in group. Historically, a definite spatial pattern in the structure of villages may be discerned in the Bengal zone. The village institutions in much of Bangladesh region were mere social entities and were too weak to perform significant administrative and economic functions.

This study contains two levels of analysis—micro and macro. At micro level it starts with an analysis of grass-roots institutions at local level. The first chapter presents a survey of the rural settlements in Bangladesh region in the present as well as in the past. The methodology of this chapter differs from the traditional historical methods. It reads history backwards and starts with an account of villages in Bangladesh today with a view to understanding the past

[1] In this study, Bengal refers to the undivided province of Bengal in British India. Bengal zone signifies a distinct territorial zone (extending from Chittagong to Teliagarhi) with natural frontiers. Bangladesh region refers to those areas of Bengal zone (roughly corresponding to territorial limits of Bangladesh) where historically social and economic institutions were weak. Bangladesh stands for the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

by the present. Following Marc Bloch (1953), two justifications may be given for this methodology. First, the natural progression of all research is "from the best (or least badly) understood to the most obscure". Secondly, Marc Bloch rightly observes, "For here, at the present, is immediately perceptible that vibrance of human life which only a great effort of the imagination can restore to the old texts".

This study begins with an analysis of micro institutions at the grass-roots level in Bangladesh region. The first chapter surveys the qualitative as well as quantitative evidence on the structure of rural settlements in Bangladesh. A comparison of villages in Bangladesh region with those in other parts of South Asia suggests that the degree of corporateness of a typical village in Bangladesh region was low compared to grass-roots institutions in much of the subcontinent. The weakness of grass-roots institutions in Bangladesh region nurtured vigorous individualism which was antagonistic to institutional development.

The second chapter explores the determinants of the structure of rural settlements. In this connection, psychological and economic theories on "open" and "corporate" villages are examined. It suggests that the uniqueness of the structure of the rural settlements in Bangladesh region can be largely explained in terms of economic costs and benefits.

The third chapter seeks to identify the linkages between micro and macro institutions in Bangladesh. It establishes a strong correlationship between the weakness of grass-roots institutions with political fragmentation, instability, dominance of intermediaries, rent-seeking and factionalism in Bangladesh region. The weakness of political institutions in this region is attributed to lack of grass-roots institutions.

The fourth chapter attempts to explain the unique success of Islam in Bangladesh region. A survey of the existing literature indicates that no satisfactory explanation for the relative success of Islamic proselytization efforts in Bangladesh region has been offered as yet. It puts forward the hypothesis that the weakness of institutions in rural settlements of this region provided a congenial environment for the spread of an alien faith. In other words, Islamic proselytization was arrested in those areas where village government was strong.

The fifth chapter describes the conflict of territorial and extra-territorial loyalties among the Bengal Muslims resulting from the spread of Islam. It also narrates how this dichotomy of faith and

habitat was compounded by the conflicts among the newly emerging middle classes. It offers a broad explanation of recent twists and turns of nationhood in this region. Historical evidence indicates that nationhood in Bangladesh cannot be explained merely as a fabrication of the elites, it was in fact shaped by a blend of primordial and instrumental factors.

The main findings of the study are summarized in the conclusion. It suggests that historically Bangladesh has been a distinct unit in South Asia from the institutional point of view. The weakness of social institutions and the consequential primacy of the individual in social life though detrimental to her political development, enriched her cultural life by encouraging heresy, heterodoxy and the spread of an alien faith. An anatomy of the micro institutions in this region offers very useful insights to an understanding of her historical evolution. They shed light not only on the institutions in the past but also on the current policies. Hopefully, an understanding of her past will make the policy-makers in Bangladesh wiser.

Chapter 1

ANATOMY OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS

Throughout history the overwhelming majority of the people (about 97.7 percent in 1901 and about 80 percent in 1991) in the territories which constitute Bangladesh today have lived in rural settlements. The real history of Bangladesh was, therefore, enacted not in glittering royal courts but in humdrum habitations in the far-flung areas. The key to understanding of society in Bangladesh lies in proper appreciation of the dynamics of her rural settlements. Unfortunately the received doctrines on rural society in Bengal zone is based not on independent investigations on the nature and structure of rural settlements but on perceptions and preconceptions of generations of scholars on Indian village communities. The rural settlements in Bengal are, assumed to be indistinguishable from the village communities in South Asian subcontinent. This assumption is not only wrong but also misleading. It has precluded an understanding of the dynamics of social life in this region.

The uncritical acceptance of the assumption of ubiquity and universality of village community in South Asia by historians of Bangladesh is not at all surprising. The conventional paradigm of Indian village community is based on the consensus of administrators and scholars during last two hundreds years. As early as 1812, *Fifth Report of the Select Committee of the East India Company* described the village community as a "simple form of municipal government" under which "the inhabitants of the country have lived from time immemorial" (Quoted in Dutt 1960, Vol. 1 p.85). The role of village communities was romanticized by Charles Metcalfe, a

member of the Governor General's council in his celebrated minute in 1830. "The village communities", noted Metcalfe, "are little Republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts" (Dutt 1960, Vol. I pp. 275). These idyllic descriptions of village communities by the British administrators influenced the nineteenth century evolutionists who assumed village communities as the prototype of social institutions the world over. Similarly, Karl Marx's analysis of Indian society is based on the reports of the British administration in India. He maintained that these idyllic village communities "had always been the solid foundation of oriental despotism" (Marx and Engels 1962, p. 350). The idealized and utopian vision of village communities also animated the Indian nationalists who believed that the return to old village government was the answer to pervasive poverty in India. There was hardly any dissenting opinion on the subject.

The recent anthropological research in South Asia have highlighted two major limitations of the conventional representation of Indian village. First, it is not correct to assume that villages were similar throughout the whole subcontinent. In reality, there were significant regional variations in the structure of rural settlements in South Asia. About a century ago, Baden-Powell (1896) cautioned the "impossibility of disposing of the Indian village community by referring the whole of the phenomena to one theory or generalised view of the subject". So far there has been hardly any systematic effort to define and analyse the regional characteristics of rural settlements in South Asia.

Secondly, of late there has been revisionist views among scholars regarding the traditional interpretation of idyllic village communities in South Asia. Some scholars are of the opinion that the village community was not at all a general phenomenon in South Asia in the nineteenth century. The existence of village communities was confined to a small area in the country between Agra and Delhi which needed a defence organization against the raiders from neighbouring desert in the last days of the Mughal rule. Daniel Thorner came to the conclusion that the simple form of village community in South Asia as described by Karl Marx was "perhaps a quite exceptional one" (1966). Some scholars question the very significance of the village either as a corporate entity or as a meaningful unit for analysis. Dumont and Pocock concluded that the village in India is only

an architectural and demographic entity and "not a prime social reality" (1957). Even those who defend the existence of a village as an interlocking community agree that the picture of self-sufficient village communities in South Asia is overdrawn (Srinivas 1987).

In view of limitations of the conventional paradigm of village community in South Asia, it is essential to reexamine the structure of rural settlements in Bangladesh region which are also styled as 'villages'. However, historical evidence on rural society in this region is scanty. It will, therefore, be more convenient to start with an analysis of the village at present rather than attempting the reconstruction of the village in the past.

An analysis of the statistics on the village in Bangladesh during last one hundred years indicates that the exact number of villages in Bangladesh is not known today, nor was it known in the recent past. Table 3 presents the census statistics on village in Bangladesh during 1891-1991.

Table 3. Number of villages in Bangladesh, 1891-1991

Year	Total No. of villages	Total area (in sq. mile)	Average number of village per sq. mile
1891	78912	50824	1.34
1901	85039	48700	1.74
1911	91221	54515	1.67
1921	60464	52411	1.15
1931	64575	53502	1.18
1941	59393	54091	1.09
1951	61424	54141	1.13
1961	64493	55126	1.17
1974	68385	55598	1.23
1981	83666	56977	1.46
1991	86038	56977	1.51

Source : Census Reports of Governments of Bengal and Bangladesh.

There are several inconsistencies in the data on villages presented in Table 3. The total number of villages fluctuated without any apparent reason. Table-3 indicates that the total number of villages increased from 78912 in 1891 to 91221 in 1911. It suddenly dropped to 60464 in 1921. It again increased to 64575 in 1931. In 1941 it fell to 59393. These fluctuations are not at all consistent with the steady increase of population during the corresponding period (see Table 4).

Table 4. Growth of population in Bangladesh, 1891-1981

Year	Total population (in thousand)	Average population per village
1891	26811	340.6
1901	28920	340.0
1911	31550	345.8
1921	33250	548.0
1931	35600	560.0
1941	41996	706.0
1951	41932	682.0
1961	50841	788.0
1971	79479	1162.0
1981	89900	1074.5
1991	111500	1295.9

Source : Census Reports of Governments of Bengal and Bangladesh.

Except the decade 1941-51, there was a steady increase of population during the period 1891-1991 whereas total number of villages fluctuated. The fluctuations in the number of villages cannot be explained by the variation in total area. Because of recurrent alluvion and diluvion, total area of a deltaic region like Bangladesh is not constant over time. Furthermore, the estimates of total area of Bangladesh varied as the estimates of actual area of some districts were revised on the basis of cadastral surveys. To take into account these variations, the average number of villages per square mile during the period 1891-1991 were also compiled in Table 3. It appears that the average number of villages per square mile declined from 1.74 in 1901 to 1.51 in 1991. There is no obvious explanation for this fall in average number of villages per square mile.

The most important reason for the fluctuations in the number of villages from census to census is the frequent change in the definition of village. Ever since the census of 1872, it was time and again emphasised that the village in Bangladesh is different from its counterpart in other areas of the sub-continent. The difficulties in defining a village in Bangladesh were expressed in the *Census Report of 1901* in the following words:

> "A village may be either a collection of houses having a separate name or else the mauza i.e. the area treated as a village in the survey. The latter has the advantage of a definite unit regarding which there can be

no manner of doubts so long as the boundaries laid down at the survey are known, but it does not at the present time necessarily correspond to the residential village. One of the latter may spread over two mauzas or survey villages or two may lie in the same mauza or the mauzas may be altogether uninhabited. On the other hand, if the survey unit is neglected, it is very difficult to say with any precision what constitutes a village. There are many collections of houses which would be by one person called separate village while another would treat these as hamlets of other villages in the neighbourhood. In Bengal the records of Revenue survey have not been kept up to date and in most districts the survey mauza is no longer clearly traceable. Generally, therefore, a village was taken for census purposes to mean a residential village i.e. a collection of houses having a separate name with its dependent hamlets".

There are three concepts of village in Bangladesh; viz., the survey village or the mauza, the 'local' village and the census village. A mauza is an artificial unit which was defined for the purpose of cadastral survey. In the districts of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, Rangpur, and Jessore each parcel of land belonging to a separate landlord (i.e. an estate) was classified as a mauza. This approach, which was based on the experience of survey in Bihar, was discarded in the eastern districts. In most districts of Bangladesh, a mauza comprises a block of land which can be conveniently surveyed. Consequently, the natural boundaries of a terrain were taken into account in demarcating a mauza, and there was a close relationship between a mauza and a local village in the eastern districts. The Bengal Survey and Settlement Manual (1936, p. 307) lays down that the areas of the new villages should be demarcated "in accordance with locally recognized boundaries". Unlike mauzas, a local village may not always be a corporate unit territorially. They may not be located in a map easily. A local village is a mental entity. It is very difficult for an outsider to define a village. Only the inhabitants of a village have a clear perception of what village is their own. The definition of the census village, however, changed over time. Initially, local villages were treated as census villages. The definition of village was changed in 1921. An inhabited rural mauza was defined as a village in that census. Because of this change in definition, the number of villages dropped from 91221 in 1911 to 60654 in 1921. In the subsequent censuses till 1974, a rural mauza was treated as a village. This is why, the fluctuation in the number of villages since 1921 cannot be attributed to changes in the definition of the census village alone. It may, however, be argued that the early cen-

suses were defective and the results of later censuses which were undertaken after the partition of the sub-continent may be more reliable because the national data on the number of villages since the census of 1951 seem to be in line with the demographic trend. However, the disaggregated district data do not show consistent patterns. The number of villages occasionally decreased in some districts despite a steady increase in population in those districts. In order to test the reliability of data on villages in the recent censuses, the relationship between the percentage change in the number of villages in a district with the percentage change in population and percentage change in the total area of the district may be examined. If the statistics on villages are reliable, one would expect to find on the basis of cross-section data on districts a significantly positive correlation between the percentage change in the number of villages and the percentage change in population. Similarly, the relationship between the percentage change in the number of villages and the percentage change of the total area of the districts is expected to be positive. The correlation coefficients for these variables for the periods 1951-61, 1961-74 and 1974-1981 are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Correlation between the percentage change in the number of villages and the percentage change in population and in area of districts in Bangladesh

Period	Correlation between the % change of number of villages and the % change of population in a district	Correlation between the % change of number of villages and % of the area of a district.
1951-61	0.147 (0.57)	0.072 (0.28)
1961-74	–0.292 (1.18)	0.135 (0.52)
1974-81	0.412 (1.75)	– (0.00)

(Bracketed number shows 't' statistics).

Source : Khan, 1987.

The correlation between the percentage change in the number of villages and the percentage change in population in districts, though positive is statistically insignificant for the decade 1951-1961. The same correlation turns out to be negative for the period 1961-74.

This suggests that the rates of increase in the number of villages were lower in districts which experienced higher rates of population growth. There is no obvious explanation for such an inverse relationship between the growth rate of population and the number of villages. The correlation between these two variables is positive for the period 1974-81. This relationship is not, however, statistically significant. Table-5 also shows that the variations in the number of villages are not significantly related to the changes in the area of the districts.

There is no satisfactory explanation for the fluctuations in the number of villages during 1951-1981. This casts doubts on the reliability of the census data on villages. These data are neither consistent nor accurate. For example, the census of 1981 shows that in Khulna district, where population increased by nearly 8 lakh during the period 1974-81, the number of villages fell from 3853 in 1974 to 3512 in 1981. It appears that the definition of village as enunciated by the census authorities was not consistently followed at the local level. The definition of village varied from district to district. The census reports of 1951 and 1961 state that "villages" were defined as *"rural mauzas"* However, the total number of villages in these censuses exceed the number of mauzas. Similarly in 1981, there were 60315 mauzas in Bangladesh whereas the number of villages was estimated at 83666.

Despite the experience in conducting population census over a century, no satisfactory statistics on village in Bangladesh is available as yet. The fault lies not with the agencies for the collection of data but with the concept of village itself. The villages in Bangladesh, to borrow Bertocci's (1970) phrase, are elusive. No reliable statistics can be collected on this subject till the concept itself is clearly defined.

Despite the enthusiasm of early British administrators like Munro, Metcalfe, Elphinstone and Malcolm for village communities, the colonial rulers in Bengal were sceptical about the very existence of village government. In Bengal, zamindars were presumed to be the natural leaders of rural areas. As early as 1866, Browne highlighted the uniqueness of rural settlements in eastern Bengal in the following manner: "The district of Tipperah is remarkable for the total absence of village municipal institutions. In other districts in Bengal, it is customary for the inhabitants of a village to pay some sort of respect to certain individuals, usually the oldest resident ryots and to obey their orders implicitly in all ordinary matters (..). But in this

district, there are no such functionaries, and although men of an influential position command a certain account of respect, I have, in the course of my numerous tours, been much struck by the total absence of all recognised village authorities, a want which (...) I attribute to the nomadic character of the peasantry" (Quoted in Schendel 1980, p. 213).

The first census of Bengal in 1872 resulted in a systematic survey of rural institutions in this province. In the course of census operations, the colonial administrators felt the need for enlisting the support of existing rural institutions for enumeration of population. Bevereley, the Superintendent of the first census noticed that though some forms of village government or organisation existed in Bihar and parts of west Bengal, village in the traditional sense did not at all exist in east and south Bengal. The census report of 1871 clearly indicates that the degree of corporateness of village institutions diminished as one moved from the west to the east. He concluded as follows: "Villages in Bengal proper are scattered about to a degree unknown in northern India and there is almost a total absence of communal organization and sympathy" (1872, p. 4).

Gait, in the census report of India, 1911, highlighted the difference between villages in east Bengal on the one hand and those in the central and west Bengal on the other. He noted, "In central and west Bengal though the houses are seldom crowded together and each has its own patch of homestead land, they are generally constructed on a single village site. Many of the villages are situated on the banks of silted up rivers and buried in a mass of bamboo and their vegetation and are very unhealthy. In the other two natural divisions, there is often no regular village site and the houses are very scattered" (1913, p.32).

J.T. Martin in his report on census of India in 1921 underlined the variation in structure of rural settlements in different parts of India. He observed: "In fact in large part of Bengal where owing to the peculiar configuration of the country, the houses are scattered over the face of the country without any reference to civic unity or corporate life, there is practically nothing which corresponds to a village in the ordinary sense of the word, and the mauza, which is for convenience's sake translated as a village, is merely that tract of land, inhabited or not, which has been demarcated as a unit for revenue purposes. Throughout the northern, central and western tracts of India, however, there is as a rule, considerably more correspondence between

the unit of area and the unit of residence than in the eastern provinces. Unlike the Bengali, the upcountry peasant is distinctly gregarious. Partly on this account and very largely owing to the necessity in unsettled times of combination against hostile attacks, the village in the north-west of India and throughout the United Provinces and the central tract of the Deccan has a distinct residential aspect which was to a certain extent considered in determining the unit of revenue administration" (1924, p. 78). In the same vein, Thompson in his report on the census of Bengal, 1921, noted as follows: "The village in the sense in which it is ordinarily understood in India and indeed in all parts of the world should not be used without qualification in respect of rural Bengal. The picture which the word conjures up in the mind is that of a close collection of houses belonging to cultivators and agricultural labourers employed on the land for two or three miles around, the village watchmen or other village servants, a money-lender and a few shopkeepers and artisans, potter, cobbler, tinsmith etc., a more pretentious house belonging to a landlord or middleman, some sort of common meeting place frequented by the villagers and a place of public workshop, a temple in a Hindu village or a mosque in a Mohammadan village. Such villages are not to be found in Bengal except in parts of Burdwan district" (1923, p. 97). W.W. Hunter in the Imperial Gazetteer of India reiterated the prevailing view on the weakness of corporate institutions in rural East Bengal. He observed: "The villages of Bengal vary greatly in different parts. In Bihar, especially south of the Ganges, the buildings are closely packed together, and there is no room for trees or gardens. As one goes eastwards, the houses, though collected in a single village site, are further apart and each stands on its own patch of homestead land, where vegetables are grown and fruit trees and bamboos afford a grateful protection from the glare of the tropical sun. Further east, again, in the swamps of East Bengal, there is often no trace of a central village site and the houses are found in straggling rows lining the high banks of rivers or in small clusters on mounds from 12 to 20 feet in height laboriously thrown up during the dry months when the water temporarily disappears. The average population of a village is 355, but the definition of this unit for census purposes was not uniform. In some parts the survey area was adopted, elsewhere the residential village with its dependent hamlet was taken, but in practice it was often very difficult to decide whether a particular group of houses should be taken

as a separate entity or treated as hamlet belonging to some other village" (1985, p. 34).

A review of the census reports and district gazetteers during last two hundred years clearly indicates consensus among the colonial administrators on two hypotheses. First the structure of village in Bengal Presidency differed significantly from those in other areas of South Asia. Secondly, the degree of corporateness of rural institutions in Bengal itself diminished gradually from the west to the east. In order to examine the first hypothesis, it is essential to recount the basic features of conventional representation of village in South Asia.

The term *gram*—the vernacular expression for village in Sanskrit refers to "clan", "community" or "host" and "aggregate". On the basis of its lexicographic meaning, Baden-Powell infers that *gram* refers to a "tribal grouping of limited number of families" (1896, p. 74). Though the expression *gram* or its dialectic forms (such as *gaon*) is used to refer to units of rural settlements over a large part of South Asia; forms of village vary from region to region. There are two main schools regarding the relationship between various forms of villages. According to one school of historians, different forms of villages relate to different stages of history. At the earliest stage, the joint ownership of land by a whole clan prevailed. This form of village community dissolved in later stages into ownership of land by isolated joint families which led to the formation of different types of villages. According to the other school, different types of villages originated separately in dissimilar environments and it is not possible to determine which was the earliest form of village.

The colonial administrators in the nineteenth century classified two forms of villages in South Asia from the point of view of land revenue system. They are: (1) *Raiyatwari* village and (2) Joint village. There are two main differences between the raiyatwari and joint village. First, the leadership in the *raiyatwari* villages lay in the hands of a hereditary village-headmen (Patel). A joint village was ruled by a village aristocracy consisting of a number of heads of houses (locally known as the *Panchayat*). Second, in the *raiyatwari* village, the ownership of wasteland of a village vested in the state though the villagers commonly used the adjoining waste. In the joint villages, the adjoining waste was considered an integral part of the village property and was at the absolute disposal of the owners as much as any other land.

There are two categories of Joint villages, viz., *pattidari and bhaiachara.* The main difference in these two forms of joint villages lies in the procedure for the distribution of land. In the *Pattidari* village, land is divided on the basis of ancestral share of an individual in the property. In the *bhaiachara* village, land is distributed in accordance with the size of labour force in a household or the rank of the individual holder. The distribution of land was, therefore, more egalitarian in *bhaiachara* villages than in *Pattidari* villages. Among the P*attidari* villages the distribution of land was most unequal in zamindari villages which were owned by the landlords. According to Baden-Powell (1896) the *raiyatwari* villages were established by the Dravidian tribes who had originally cleared the land. The Joint villages were formed by the invading tribes who acquired the lordship of existing villages or founded new villages as overlords of the area. This is, however, merely a conjecture which is yet to be substantiated by historical research.

The classification of village on the basis of the system of land revenue ignores important differences among the villages. Starting with the assumption that villages in South Asia have a distinctive design based on the values of its civilization, Andre Beteille divides the villages of South Asia into two categories; (1) the core village and (2) the peripheral village (1980, pp. 108-113). The core villages are mostly located in the heartland of Indian civilization and were shaped by the Brahmanical tradition. There are three interrelated features of a "core" village, Firstly, it was a system of multiple gradation associated with an elaborate division of labour. Secondly, in a core village there were innumerable vertical ties of a diffuse and enduring nature between families and persons. Thirdly, there was a general acceptance of hierarchical values among different members of a "core" village. The 'peripheral' villages tended to be smaller, more homogeneous and less stratified. These villages were based on tribal and non-Brahmanical traditions. There are two main weaknesses of Beteille's classification. First, there is no objective criteria for differentiating the "peripheral" from "core" villages. Secondly, this classification does not take into account the regional variations in the structure of the peripheral villages.

Despite the diversity of forms of Indian villages, three interrelated characteristics of ideal-typical villages of South Asia can be easily identified. First, a village is a distinct administrative unit. Second, a village is an economic isolate. Third, a village is a social entity.

As an administrative unit, a village performs three main functions. First, a typical village government is responsible for the collection of land revenue and for the management of the wasteland adjacent to the village. Second, a typical village has its own machinery for the maintenance of law and order and for the settlement of intra-village disputes. Third, the village government undertakes public works which require the co-operation of all villagers (such as the construction and maintenance of irrigation systems and roads and the observance of village festivals). Each village had, therefore, an effective government. In the *raiyatwari* villages, the village government was headed by a *Patel* who was a hereditary headman. The headman had magisterial powers and various duties of police and protection. In the joint villages, the functions of the village government were exercised by the *panchayat*. The *Patels* or the *Panchayat* were assisted by a host of village officers. A village employed a *patwari* or village accountant. The village government also employed village watchmen and servants belonging to the untouchable caste. The following extract from a British Parliamentary Report in 1812 describes the functions of typical village officers in the early nineteenth century:

> "The *potail*, or head inhabitant, who has generally the superintendence of the affairs of the village, settles the disputes of the inhabitants, attends to the police, and performs the duty of collecting the revenue within his village, a duty which his personal influence and minute acquaintance with the situation and concerns of the people render him the best qualified for this charge. The *kurnum* keeps the accounts of cultivation, and registers everything connected with it. The *Tallier and totie*, the duty of the former of which consists in gaining information of crimes and offences and in escorting and protecting persons travelling from one village to another; the province of the latter appearing to be more immediately confined to the village, consisting among other duties, in guarding the crops and assisting in measuring them. The boundary man who preserves the limits of the village, or gives evidence respecting them in cases of dispute. The Superintendent of Tanks and Water courses distributes the water for the purpose of agriculture. The Brahmin, who performs the village worship. The school master, who is seen teaching the children in a village to read and write in the sand. The calendar—Brahmin or astrologer, etc. These officers and servants generally constitute the establishment of a village; but in some parts of the country it is of less extent; some of the duties and functions being described above being united in the same person; in others it exceeds the above-named number of individuals".(Quoted in Marx and Engels 1962, p.349).

Anthropological studies in recent decades indicate that village officials continue to perform important role. As Dube points out, "Even today, the village retains its semi-autonomous character. Invariably it has a recognized headman with a definite set of duties and functions" (1955, p. 2). Mandelbaum however, reports that the officials of a village is not necessarily a leader of the village. The actual influence of a village headman was also dependent on personal abilities and social status of the official concerned (1990, pp 345-348).

Economic self sufficiency is another stylized characteristic of the village. As Beteille says, the people had conception of an ideal village comprising categories of people and they tried to make their particular village correspond as closely as possible to this ideal (1980, p. 108). Each village attracted to itself a body of resident craftsmen and menials, who were not paid in cash but were employed by the village on fixed remuneration. These remunerations were sometimes paid in the form of a bit of rent-free land or in the form of small payments in kind at the time of harvest. The list of such artisans includes blacksmith, potter, shoemaker, or cobbler, carpenter, barber and in some cases astrologers and priests. A typical village, in the words of Karl Marx was "based on domestic industry, in that peculiar combination of handweaving, hand-spinning and hand-tilling agriculture which gave them self-supporting power" (1962, p. 350).

Of late, the myth of economic self-sufficiency of Indian villages has been challenged by anthropologists. Srinivas noted the following loopholes in the myth of autarky of villages. First, basic commodities like salt, spices, sugar-cane, betel leaves, areca nuts, coconuts, tobacco, lime paste, silver and gold were not produced in every village. Historical evidence indicates that these items were consumed in all villages. This clearly suggests that since ancient times, there was significant intervillage trade which was conducted through weekly markets and occasional fairs. Secondly, the concept of economic self-sufficiency assumes that a village contains all essential types of artisans and servicing castes. Srinivas estimated that each self-sufficient village must have at least seven castes. About one fourth of all South Asian villages have less than 500 residents. Most of small villages did not have the requisite number of castes for economic self-sufficiency. Srinivas rightly concluded that though the villages were not in fact economically self-sufficient, they gave the impression of self-sufficiency because the villagers ate what they

grew, they paid the artisan and servicing castes in grain and a system of barter enabled grain to be used for obtaining various goods and services (Srinivas 1987, p. 55).

Opinions also differ on the social role of the village. According to Mandelbaum, "A village is not a neatly separable and conceptual package but it is nonetheless a fundamental social unit" (1970, p 329). The critics, however, maintain that the village was not a distinct social unit because the lower castes are not allowed access to wells and temples and consequently the village does not include all those living in it (Dumont and Pocock, 1957). Srinivas disputes this interpretation of the exclusion of *dalits* from wells and temples. He argues that "groups excluded in religious contexts may have important roles in secular contexts" and "the exclusion of a caste from particular contexts cannot be adduced as evidence of non-membership of local community" (1987, pp 50-51). Village solidarity found expression in social ceremonies, village rites and festivals. Very often a village has a central place of its own. In some villages, the house of the headman is the focus of social life; in others, temples or mosques are the hubs of social life. Furthermore, the close interrelationship between the villagers often engenders a sense of solidarity or "village patriotism". However, even from social point of view, villages in India were not water-tight compartments. "Caste ties stretched across villages and in a greater part of northern India, the concept of village exogamy, and the existence of hypergamy on a village basis, constitute an advertisement for inter-village interdependence. The partiality of peasants for pilgrimage and fairs also highlights the fact that the Indian village was always a part of a wider network" (Srinivas 1987, p.39). Though the canonical interpretation oversimplified the role of the village community in South Asia, social scientists continue to emphasize the corporateness of villages. The mainstream view on South Asian village may be summarized in the following words of Dube: "As a territorial as well as social, economic and ritual unit, village is a separate and distinct entity. The residents of this settlement recognize their corporate identity, and it is recognized as such by others. It is not uncommon to find in them a sentiment of attachment towards their own settlement site. In several matters the village acts as a unit" (1955, p. 7).

There is, however, difference of opinion as to whether village institutions were strengthened or weakened by the British *Raj*. According to traditional interpretation of South Asian history, the village in India in

its idealized form existed before the establishment of the British rule. It is argued that village communities were destablized by the monetization of the rural economy in the wake of innovations introduced by the British imperialists. This interpretation is based on the assumption that a village community represents a natural economy. This view is disputed by a second school who maintains that village communities were created by the State as an expedient means for collection of land revenue. For example, Max Weber is of the view that the Russian *mir* (village) was not a primitive institution but a "product of taxation system and serfdom" (Weber, 1961 p. 33) The village government in Russia was responsible for the collection of revenue from all inhabitants in the village. Consequently, even if an individual member of a Russian village left the *mir* to take an entirely different calling, the village retained the right to call him back at any time to impose upon him the share of common burdens. The Russian land revenue system, therefore, intensified the solidarity of the villagers. Similarly it may be argued that the land revenue system introduced by the British rulers bolstered the village communities in those provinces of South Asia where all villagers were jointly made liable for the payment of land revenue. The British rulers also created the institution of *lambardar* (who virtually acted as a headman) in areas where there was no recognized headman. Though economic innovations introduced by the British rulers seriously undercut the self-sufficiency of the village, their administrative measures in some provinces worked in the opposite direction by rejuvenating the village communities.

Outwardly the village in Bangladesh is very often portrayed as a clone of its north Indian counterpart. One economic historian maintained that from time immorial the village has been the "basic unit of the economic structure of the country" (Islam 1984, p. 18). The myth of economic autarky of the village in Bangladesh have been blown out of proportions. It has already been shown that most village communities were not likely to be economically self-sufficient. Srinivas's arguments regarding interdependence of villages are equally valid about rural settlements in Bangladesh region. The main reason for economic isolation of the village in north India is the lack of a viable transportation system. As Marx said "The village isolation produced the absence of roads in India and the absence of roads perpetuated the village isolation. On this plan a community existed with a given scale of low inconveniences without intercourse with

other villages, without the desires and efforts indispensable to social advance" (Marx and Engels 1962, p. 355).

This picture of isolation of the villages does not seem to be valid for Bangladesh. In this deltaic region, most of the villages were connected with each other through waterways. Being perennially navigable, most of the rivers were natural routes for long distance and inland trade. Historical evidence clearly indicates regular intervillage trade through weekly markets *(hats)* and fairs (Majumdar 1943, pp 559-560).

Furthermore, available statistics indicate that most of the villages in Bangladesh were small. For example, the census of 1891 reports that 76.08 percent villages in Bangladesh contained less than 500 people (see Table 6). Even in 1981, 38.49 percent villages in Bangladesh had less than 500 residents. In 1891, 33420 villages in Bangladesh contained less than two hundred inhabitants. According to Kautilya, villages should consist of not less than a hundred and not more than five hundred families of cultivators of service classes (Kautilya 1967, p. 45). Assuming a minimum family size of five persons, population of a village should, according to Kautilya, vary between 500 and 2500 persons. By Kautilya's standard, most of the villages in Bengal in the nineteenth century were small. Buchanan Hamilton's accounts also indicate that most of the villages in Bangladesh region were very small. It is doubtful whether most villages in Bangladesh ever contained all the castes and occupations required for a self-sufficient village. This point was stressed by Gait in the census report of 1901: "The village organization with its complete outfit of servants and artisans, who render it independent of all outside help, which is so common in other parts of India, never seems to have fully developed in the greater part of Bengal proper and there is a great dearth of local craftsman which is now being met by the settlement of immigrants from Bihar". The same report states that a large number of villages in Bihar and Orissa approximated the idea of autarky. Whenever a new village was formed in Bihar and Orissa, the founders of the village used to secure their own staff of village servants and artisans, who were induced to settle in such villages by small grants of land averaging about an acre in area, which they enjoyed in addition to their customary remunerations from the villages they served (Gait, 1902). These facts clearly suggest that the village in Bangladesh is not at all a distinct economic unit. This finding is also consistent with the mainstream interpretation of the Indian village.

Table 6. A comparison of the percentage of villages according to population size in 1891 and 1981

Size of Population	Percentage of Villages in 1891	Percentage of Villages in 1981
Less than 500	76.08	38.49
Between 500 and 999	16.20	26.11
Between 1000 and 1999	6.40	19.95
Between 2000 and 2999	0.87	6.86
Between 3000 and 5000	0.32	5.32
Over 5000	0.13	3.27

Source : Census of Bengal 1891 and Provisional Estimates of Census of Bangladesh, 1981.

Unlike its north Indian counterpart a village in Bangladesh was never a distinct administrative entity. The areas which now occupy Bangladesh never had the experience of *raiyatwari*, *pattidari* or *bhaichara* villages. The institution of village headman in north Indian sense was unknown in Bangladesh. They were different from village government in north India in two ways. First, unlike the typical village communities of South Asian subcontinent, there was no organised and distinct village administration in Bangladesh region. A typical village community in South Asia was responsible for the collection of land revenue, keeping law and order, management of wasteland, and, construction, operation and maintenance of physical infrastructure (such as irrigation and communication network). The Jataka stories of the fifth century attest to such energetic communal life in South Asian villages (Basham 1959, p. 199). The functions of the village headman in medieval India as described by Abul Fadl and Monserrate clearly indicate that revenue in north Indian villages in the Mughal times was paid collectively and the village government used to operate a common fund (Habib, 1985, pp 134-155). The *raiyatwari* villages were headed by a *patel*, a hereditary headman. In the joint villages, the administration was run by the *panchayat*. Such village governments were unknown to Bangladesh region. There was no joint liability for the rent of the lands in the entire village. It is not, therefore, at all surprising that the British rulers in the eighteenth century Bengal did not find any such village government. Bangladesh is the only region where there is not a single instance of the settlement by the British rulers of an estate with the village community or village headman (Government of East

Pakistan 1959, p. 32). As revenue was not paid jointly, there was no common fund in the village.

Secondly, the system of employing village officials did not at all exist in the region. The posts of *Patwari* or village accountant in the traditional sense are unknown here (see Postcript). The only village official who was occasionally employed in the rural areas was the village watchmen or *chowkidar*. The posts of other village officials were conspicuously absent in Bangladeshi villages.

Because of the assumption of universality of village communities in South Asia, some historians maintain that elements of village government existed in ancient Bengal. According to one historian, land in a village belonged not to the state but to the whole village or village assemblies. This hypothesis was discussed in details by Islam (1984, pp 107-109) who rightly concluded that this hypothesis is based on an misinterpretation of available epigraphic sources. According to another historian, the expression *"gramika"* in Damodorpur inscription (circa 6th century) may refer to the existence of the office of village headman in ancient Bengal (Roy 1400 B.S.). There are two reasons for rejecting the hypothesis that village headman in north Indian sense existed in Bangladesh region. First, inscriptions relating to property transfer in this region clearly indicate there was no focal administrative authority in the village (Morrison 1970). According to Damodorpur inscription, land transfer had to be notified to *Mahattaras* (leading men of the village), *ashtakuladhikaranas* (council of eight), *gramikas* (village heads) and the householders. Similarly the Mallasarul plate indicates that the property transfer had to be communicated to *agraharina* (leading men), *mahattara* (an elderly respected person), *bhatta* (learned men), *khadgi* (swordsman) and *vahanayaka* (a superintendent of transportation). The Dharmaditya B plate also states that land transfer had to notified to the leading men of the *vishaya*. Had there been a powerful village headman, notifying the leading men of the village and the house-holders would not have been necessary at all. Secondly, the office *gramika* is not at all included in the list of local authority in Mallasarul and Dharmadotya B Plates. It suggests that the *gramika* was not an integral part of rural administration. It is not also clear whether the *gramika* is an honorific title or an employee of the state. The inscriptions clearly suggest that villages in Bangladesh were not run by headmen or panchayats but were dominated by the elites such as *mahattaras*, *bhattas*, and. *kutumabas*. This pattern continued till

the 19th century when the British administrators in Bengal reported about "absence of the germs of corporate life" (Thompson 1923) in the rural Bengal.

Though a village in Bangladesh region lacked the characteristics of either a distinctive administrative unit or well-defined economic isolate, it displayed some of the marks of a social entity. The sense of identity of a village was often demonstrated in social functions (such as theatrical performances) and religious rites (such as rites for the prevention of epidemics) (Tarafder 1965). There are also occasional references to village patriotism in medieval Bengali literature. In *Chaitanya Charitamrita* a Quazi when threatened by Chaitanya, reportedly, responded as follows: "By village relationship Chakravarti (i.e. Chaitanya's maternal grandfather) is my father's brother, village relationship is stronger than blood ties. (Quoted in Shahidullah 1967, p. 122). Historical evidence also indicates that village influentials often resolved local disputes. Recent anthropological and sociological research suggests the existence of *samaj* —"an indigenous social institution through which villagers enacted and enforced the normative rules by which their social lives and normal codes were governed" (Adnan 1990, p. 169). The recent village studies also document in some villages the existence of *shalish* mechanism which represents a court of village influentials. However, recent evidence also indicates that the institution of *samaj* is eroded by selfish behaviour of local influentials (Arens and Van Beurden 1977). The membership of *samaj* is not fixed. *Samaj* groups often break up; some times they also merge. There is considerable variation in the influence of *samaj* from region to region. This hypothesis is also supported by historical evidence. It is interesting to note that there is no uniform designation for village influentials in Bangladesh. In Comilla district the village influentials are known as *sardars* and *matbars*. In Dhaka district, they are known as *murubbis*. In Rangpur district they are addressed as *Paramanik* or *Dewan*. In Bogra district they are known as *mondols*. In some areas, there are informal councils of elders which are known as *panchayats* or *bichar sabhas*. There are also informal social groups which are described as *samaj*, *rewai* or *mallots*. These variations in designation suggest that there was no uniform system of social control. It is also evident from recent empirical research that these social groups never exercised the formal functions of village government. A comparative analysis suggests that social cohesion in Bangladeshi villages

was much weaker than that in north Indian villages (Thompson, 1923). In most of the villages in Bangladesh, there was no central place for socializing. Available evidence strongly suggest that historically the corporateness of villages in Bangladesh was much weaker than that of rural settlements in other parts of South Asia. J.H. Lindsay rightly concluded that the village community was a myth as far as Bengal is concerned, it also did not exist in the pre-British times (1964, p. 512).

The second hypothesis of the British administrators that the corporateness of village institutions increased from the east to the west in Bengal is based on qualitative evidence. However, the field observations of the British administrators are supported by recent anthropological research. Following Mandlebaum, three main types of rural settlement patterns may be identified in South Asia. First, a nucleated village is a tight cluster of houses surrounded by the fields of villages, perhaps with an outlying hamlet or several satellite hamlets. Secondly, "linear settlements" refer to habitations in which houses are dispersed "with little or no physical demarcation where one village ends or where another begins". The third category includes small hilly settlements which contain a scattering of homesteads. (Mandlebaum 1974, p. 337).

Anthropological studies indicate that the village in west Bengal region is mainly nucleated whereas the settlement pattern of village in Bangladesh is linear. The nucleated villages tend to be much older and most of its land is held by locally dominant upper castes. The linear village, by contrast, tends to be new settlements where landownership is more evenly distributed. In the linear settlement, no decision could be taken by a single individual. In such villages, all influentials in the village have to be invited to settle disputes or to make public decision. Obviously it is easier to control nucleated villages than dispersed linear settlements. Apart from Bangladesh region, linear dispersed settlements existed in Kerala and Kankan in South India.

Both historical and anthropological evidence indicate the preponderance of dispersed linear settlements in Bangladesh region. The district magistrate of Barisal district in south Bengal, described a typical village in the 19th century in the following manner: "The houses are scattered and there is little of collectivist village life. Each house stands by itself on its mound, surrounded by a thicket of fruit trees as there is no house in sight or nearer than 100 yards".

In the same vein, Bertocci described a village in the Comilla district. "The village cannot be seen, as peasant villages elsewhere have often been described as a territorially-bounded residential system. Rather it is at best an intervening organization in an institutional constellation which is geographically expansive and demographically inclusive in character in which both formal and informal groups are flexibly relevant or not relevant to the individual depending on social control" (Bertocci, 1970).

An analysis of historical evidence also suggests that the village in Bangladesh region in the ancient times was much smaller than those in west Bengal. The Bhattera copper plate of Govindakeshra (circa 13th century) indicates that the average area (based on the data of 28 villages) of a village in Sylhet district was 468 acres; the average number of household per village was 10.5 only. It may be mentioned here that all the census reports since 1891 show that the average population per village in Sylhet was always the lowest in Bangladesh region. According to Taparanadighi copper plate (circa 12th century), Belhisthi village in Vikrampura contained only 200.1 acres of land. By contrast, the villages in West Bengal were larger and more populous than those in east Bengal. Naihati copper plate of Vallala Sena (12th century) records that Vallalahitha village in Burdwan occupied 1916.15 acres including waste land and waterways. Govindapur copper plate of Lakshman Sena (12th century) mentions that the area of Viddarsashan village in Burdwan was 400.5 acres (including waste land and forest). (Roy 1400 B.S.). Though historical evidence on village size in Bangladesh and west Bengal region is scanty, the conclusions suggested by such evidence are consistent with recent anthropological findings on the pattern of rural settlements. The preponderance of small villages in Bangladesh region seems to have continued till the early years of this century.

Following Popkin (1979), rural settlements may be broadly divided into two categories: (1) corporate village and (2) open village. Most of the world's peasantry used to live in corporate villages, most of them now live in open villages. A corporate village is a closed organization "with same form of collective responsibility for the payment of taxes, clear boundaries between the village and the outside world, restrictions on landownership, a well-defined concept of village citizenship and frequently with land that was owned or managed by the village". An open village was characterized by "individual responsibility in the payment of taxes, indistinct boundaries

between the village and the outside world, few or no restrictions on landownership, imprecise notions of village citizenship and privately owned land" (Popkin 1979, pp. 1-2, 32-82). Corporate and closed villages are ideal types which may not always exist in their pure forms. Very often there may be something in between. The village community which was romanticised by the British administrators was a corporate village. Such villages existed in certain parts of north and south India. By contrast, the villages in the deltaic areas of Bengal which now constitute Bangladesh were open. The villages in west Bengal region which contains nucleated villages were a mix of corporate and open villages where the elements of corporate villages were predominant.

Chapter 2

DYNAMICS OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS

An anatomy of rural settlements in the active delta in Bengal which now constitutes Bangladesh indicates that the pattern of settlement in a typical village has been linear and dispersed compared to nucleated village in the moribund delta which is now included in the state of West Bengal. A village in Bangladesh has been mainly "open" whereas the typical village in other parts of South Asia has been "corporate". This does not mean that all villages in Bangladesh region have been similar. It is not unlikely that an individual village may diverge from the general pattern in some aspects. Nevertheless it is possible to generalize about statistical uniformity of rural settlements. What Hicks observed about statistical uniformity in economics is equally relevant here: "We do not claim, in our demand theory for instance, to be able to say anything useful about the behaviour of a particular consumer, which may be dominated by motives peculiar to himself; but we do claim to be able to say something about the behaviour of the whole market – ... Economics is rather specifically concerned with such "statistical behaviour" (Hicks 1969, pp. 3-4).The focus of this analysis is, therefore, on the general pattern of rural settlements in Bengal.

Broadly speaking, there are two major schools on the determinants of the structure of rural settlements: (1) psychological and (2) economic. The psychological school maintains that the structure of a village is shaped by the villagers' attitude towards life. Opinions, however, differ on the attitude of villagers. According to moral economists like Scott, the peasants tend to cooperate with each other

and the corporate village is the expression of this cooperative attitude towards life. Another school maintains that the peasants do not trust each other and consequently they prefer to live in open villages.

The moral economists assume that villagers are risk-averse and influenced primarily by considerations of safety-first. In their opinion, corporate villages are designed to insure the members of a village against a likely subsistence crisis. Such villages encourage labour exchange, the use of communal property for the subsistence of orphans and widows, rent reduction on crop failure and pervasive internal social controls of the better-off (patrons) to provide for the minimum needs of the poor (clients). The underlying principle is that "all should have a place, a living, not that all should be equal" (Scott 1976).

Scott's generalizations are based on his investigations on the rural settlements in Annam in Indo-China. He exaggerates the ability of the villagers in undertaking collective action which seldom succeeds in generating effective insurance or welfare arrangements. Scott's findings are not corroborated in other parts of Indo-China. Samuel Popkin (1979) reports from Cochinchina that peasant villagers find it very difficult to organize collective action.

A diametrically opposite view of peasant psychology is presented by George Foster, an anthropologist, who takes his primary materials from Mexico. This view is variously known as the "Image of Limited Good" or "scarcity-consciousness" or "peasant-pie" approach. This school assumes that peasants believe that the good fortune accessible to them is strictly limited. In such a society, all transactions are viewed as zero-sum games where the gain of one party results in the corresponding loss of another party. Because of distrust, envy and suspicion, cooperation among peasants is very rare (Foster 1965). The corporateness of such villages is likely to be low.

In view of wide diversity of structure for rural settlements, it is hazardous to generalize Foster's findings on Mexico to all peasant societies. Foster himself admits that peasants in threatened circumstances might seek maximum cooperation (1965, p.301). Consequently, corporate villages came into being in many areas.

The economic explanation on the structure of rural settlements is based on the theory of public choice which provides useful insights into non-market decision making. The underlying assumption of this approach is that the existence and efficiency of political, economic and social institutions depend on their economic benefits and costs.

Institutions in essence are contractual arrangements among individuals for efficient provision of public goods such as security and minimization of negative externalities (effects of one's action on third parties). Such contractual arrangements tend to succeed where the benefits of a social contract exceed the costs of its negotiation and enforcement. However, the outcome of such arrangements may be uncertain where there is divergence between the public and private benefit and the parties to the contract do not trust each other.

An interesting explanation for the corporate structure of Japanese villages was provided by Hayami. He views the village "as a community which undertakes collective action to supply public goods and to internalize production externalities" (Hayami 1981). He hypothesized that the basic compulsion underlying the corporateness in the structure of rural settlements is the relative scarcity—the scarcity of non-labour resources relative to labour. Because of the market failure, the problem of scarce resource allocation cannot be resolved through price-mechanism. He compared the "loosely-structured" villages in Thailand with "tightly-structured" villages in Japan and suggested the following hypotheses:

1. Land was abundant in Thailand and there was no compulsion to enforce property rights. Japanese villages which experienced strong population pressures needed effective organization to protect and define property.
2. Water in some areas may be a critical resource. However, water is not considered a scarce resource unless ecological conditions are conducive to control or reallocation of water by human efforts. The control of annual flooding in Thailand was beyond the means of Thai villagers. Consequently there was no cooperation of Thai farmers for water control. By contrast, rice farming in Japan developed in the terraces and intermountain basin. Effective water control by villages in such terrain is possible by harnessing small streams. Hayami, therefore, argues that the need for group action to construct, maintain and operate irrigation system was a major compulsion for the development of tightly structured social system in Japanese villages.
3. In Thailand rice can be grown almost any time throughout a year. In Japan rice is grown in a short time in summer months. The Japanese villages needed strong organizations to adhere to

the tight schedule required for close cooperation in the timing and sequence in the use of labour and water.

Popkin (1979) explains lack of corporateness of villages in Cohinchina in terms of economic benefits and costs. In his view, members of traditional peasant communities are primarily interested in their own selfish interests rather than group interests. He underscores the fact that the structure of villages is not determined by actual social benefits and costs but by perceptions of costs and benefits of participants. The peasants perceive that village-scale scheme to insure against risk fails because free-riders, who are not eligible for such benefits, usurp the benefits of group action without sharing the costs. Consequently, peasants seek subsistence guarantees in smaller groups such as a family. In such an environment where the villagers are sceptical about benefits of group action, the villages tend to be loose and open.

Economic theories of Hayami and Popkin illustrate the fact that determinants of costs and benefits of group action may vary from region to region. As Robert Wade (1985) suggests, the economic benefits and costs of a village organization in the same region may vary significantly with small differences in topography, cropping patterns, resource endowment etc. Basing on his field work in Andhra Pradesh, he enumerated six broad factors for successful collective action:

1. Type of common-pool resource. The likelihood of successful organization increases if the common-pool resource is clearly defined and small so that it can be effectively managed.
2. The cost of exclusion. If the costs of exclusion (such as fencing) are high, there are stronger incentives for successful collective action.
3. Relationship between the common-pool resource and user group. The following factors contribute to effective collective action (a) greater overlap between the location of the common-pool resource and the residence of the users (because the users take more interest in the use of this resource), (b) greater demand and the indispensability of the resource for survival, and (c) knowledge of the sustainable yields of the common pool resource.
4. User group. Successful cooperation is contingent on the cohesion of the groups (smaller groups tend to be cohesive), the

relative power of the beneficiaries of the common-pool resource and the existence of arrangements for discussion and punishment for rule-breaking.

5. Noticeability. Ease of detection of rule-breaking free-riders is an essential condition for successful cooperation.
6. Recognition of local rights by the state. The inability of the state to enforce private property rights encourages organization at grass-roots level.

The economic models presented by Hayami, Popkin and Wade clearly suggest that no generalization on the structure of village is feasible. It is essential to understand the physical as well as social environment in which rural settlements operate.

The first attempt to explain the openness of villages in Bangladesh was made by Browne, a nineteenth century administrator in Bengal. He attributed the weakness of village institutions in eastern districts of Bengal to frequent migrations of the peasants. He was of the opinion that owing to underpopulation in eastern Bengal, the peasants in these areas were "as migrating as swallows and (they) usually change the place of residence at that time of year when heaviest instalments of land revenue fall due" (Quoted in Van Schendel, p. 213). There are three weaknesses of this theory. First, underpopulation is not unique to eastern Bengal alone. The density of population in South Asia was low in the pre-British period. In Irfan Habib's (1969, p. 34) assessment. the extent of cultivation in Moghul India was "about half of what it was about the beginning of this century in the middle Gangetic basin of central India". Morris D. Morris described the subcontinent as "a virgin land as late as 1800" (1963, p. 609). According to Palit, total acreage under cultivation in Bengal at the time of the Permanent Settlement in 1793 was only 3 million acres whereas the cultivated area in Bengal in 1867 was estimated at 70 million acres(1975, p. 154). If Browne's hypothesis is correct, open villages would be predominant in other areas of South Asia also. Secondly, in the long run, it was counterproductive for landlords to charge exorbitant rent which forced the peasants to flee away. In a labour-scarce economy, such landlords would not be able to attract sufficient number of tenants. On the other hand, migration involved costs and inconveniences. The tenants would not like to migrate if rent is reasonable. The flight of farmers to escape exorbitant rent is not likely to be an enduring feature of any rural society.

Finally, the direction of cause and effect relationship between migration and openness is not unambiguous. Migration will be difficult from a corporate village which would take preventive measures against migration. It may, therefore, be a consequence of openness of village, rather than its cause.

Another plausible explanation for lack of corporateness of the village in Bangladesh may be provided by the frontier thesis propounded by Turner in the context of the history of the USA. In Turner's view, the frontier always attracts the rebels, heretics and malcontents. The continuous migration of malcontents from the centre keeps alive the individualistic spirit in the frontier (Turner, 1953). Life on the frontier is free, informal and easy. Frontier might promote open villages for two reasons. First, the immigrants to frontier tend to be restless, defiant of authority and highly individualistic. Such an environment discourages the formation of corporate institutions. Secondly, settlements in the frontier are new. Anthropological studies in Bengal delta show that such new settlements in the frontier are inhabited by middle and lower jatis with evenly distributed land-ownership and minimal social interaction (Mandelbaum 1990, p. 339).

Eaton has used the frontier paradigm to explain the medieval history of Bengal. In his view, "Bengal was the terminus of a continuous process of Turco-Mongol conquest and migration. It was, in short, a frontier zone" (1994, P. XXIII). Eaton accepts the "safety-valve" version of Turner's frontier thesis that postulates that order is preserved in the centre by pushing off the malcontents and disaffected social elements to the frontier. In Eaton's words; Bengal became a "dumping ground for Delhi's social undesirables". He refers to expulsion of a thousand criminals by Sultan Jalal-al-Din Khalj (1290-96) to Bengal in the hope that they would be forced to dwell in Lakhnauti and would not trouble the neighbourhood of Delhi any more (1994, p. 41). Eaton, however, differs from Turner on two issues. First Turner's thesis is based on only geographical frontier. Eaton recognizes three frontiers: agrarian frontier (that divided settled agricultural communities from the forest), political frontier (that separated a distinct political entity from the rest of South Asia) and Islamic frontier (which separated Muslim from non-Muslim communities). Secondly, Turner's frontier is fixed. Eaton's frontier is moving.

On closer examination it appears that the frontier paradigm cannot satisfactorily explain the history of Bangladesh region. First,

the frontier is a relative phenomenon. The frontier conditions cannot last indefinitely. When the frontier is colonized, it becomes indistinguishable from the centre. Historical records indicate that different parts of deltaic Bangladesh had been continuously inhabited for more than two thousand years. There is, however, no significant difference between the social and political institutions in the old settled areas and those in the new areas in the Bangladesh region.

Secondly, Bengal was not an empty land like the American West. Bengal had the highest density of population in 1872 (see Table 7) among the provinces in the British India. There are strong reasons to hypothesise that Bengal had higher density of population than other areas of South Asia in the past also.

Table 7. Density of population in India by province, 1872

Province	Density of population per square mile
Ajmer Marwar	145
Assam	78
Bengal	433
Bihar and Orissa	318
Bombay	132
Central Provinces and Berar	99
Coorg	106
Madras	219
NWFP and Punjab	155
United Province of Agra and Oudh	391

Source : Census of India, 1911.

Demographers are of the opinion that South Asia's population remained more or less stationary during two thousand years that intervened between the ancient and modern period and that 'the long-run trend would be one of virtual fixity of numbers' (Davis 1951, p. 24). In pre-industrial societies high birth rate was offset by high death rates resulting in stationariness of population. The high density of population in Bengal in the nineteenth century, therefore, is likely to be a continuation of the past pattern rather than an aberration. The natural presumption from demographic trends is that the density of population in ancient and medieval Bengal was higher than that of other regions of South Asia in the corresponding periods. It is true that Bengal continuously received immigrants from the

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north. However, there are two misconceptions about immigration to Bengal delta. First, historians (e.g. Eaton) exaggerate the magnitude of immigration to Bengal. Compared to the total population settled in the area, the percentage of immigrants at any time is not likely to be very high. This is why, immigration could not alter the basic mould of culture and language in the area. Secondly, immigration is not unique to Bengal. There had been similar immigration to other areas of South Asia.

Historical evidence clearly suggests high density of population in Bangladesh region in ancient and medieval times. Inscriptions in ancient Bengal refer to vibrant life in innumerable rural settlements. On a close scrutiny of land transfer documents in the fifth century A.D., Nihar Ranjan Roy concluded that some villages started experiencing shortage of adequate cultivable land owing to population pressure and this compulsion prompted the settlement of new villages (1400 B.S., p. 284). Ma Huan, the Chinese traveller who visited eastern Bengal during the period 1409-1412, noted that the density of population in Bangladesh region was "very high" (Mukhopadhya 1966, p. 472). De Barros, the sixteenth century Portuguese historian stated that the population of Gauda city "is so great and the streets so thronged with the concourse and traffic of people, especially of such as come to present themselves at the King's court, that they cannot force their way past one another" (Ali 1985, Vol. IB, p. 950). The fourteenth century Moorish traveller Ibn Batuta left the following description of rural areas along the river Meghna in eastern Bengal: "We travelled down the river for fifteen days between villages and orchards just as if we were going through a bazaar" (Ibn Batuta 1969, p. 271). As early as 1807 Dr. Francis Buchanan portrayed the demographic situation in Bengal in the following manner: "That the population should be enormous is not wonderful. The notions of both Hindu and Mohammadans inculcate in the strongest manner the duty of women to propagate the species and I may venture to say that the injunction is complied with as far nearly as human nature would admit. A maiden at the puberty would be looked down upon by the natives with disgust and contempt, but few indeed are left in this humiliating situation" (Quoted in Beverley 1872, p. 83). These historical sources clearly suggest that there is no reason to presume that Bengal would be more thinly inhabited than other parts of South Asia. There were, of course, forests and accreted lands in the fringes of settled areas in Bengal. There is, however, no doubt that the

majority of the people in Bangladesh region during last one thousand years lived in previously settled areas and not in newly cleared forests or fresh reclaimed land.

Finally, Eaton's concept of moving and multiple frontiers is not at all coherent. The concept of Islamic frontier is vague. It is defined as the divide between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. There were two Islamic frontiers in north India (one along the frontier of Pakistan and the other along Bangladesh border). Furthermore, similar divide existed not only between regions but also in most rural settlements. Political frontier in Bengal did not act as the "safety valve" for the socio-political order in South Asia. The malcontents driven from the north to Bengal in most cases were not satisfied with their existence in Bengal. They always tried to reoccupy Delhi. Bengal was, therefore, not a dumping ground of the rebels but a threat to Delhi's political order. The agricultural frontier in most of the areas in South Asia was not fixed, it moved in different regions at different times. There were always large tracts of uncultivated land in all regions of South Asia. The frontier in this sense is not at all unique to Bengal.

An analysis of rural settlements of South Asia suggests three main compulsions for a strong corporate life in the rural settlements: (1) protection against foreign invaders, (2) protection against wild animals, and (3) provision of public services such as irrigation. Public security is a very important public good in areas which experience frequent incursions from outside. Tribes, clans and village communities very often provide security to its members. In Delhi region, villages of any size used to build a protective mud wall around the village. Occasionally watch towers were built to protect their walls. The Jats in Meerut division maintained for centuries a regional council for common defence and administration of governmental affairs over hundreds of Jat-dominated villages. There were nine levels of Jat organization, a social unit at each level is made up of smaller units of the level just below it (Mandelbaum 1990, pp. 282-283). Strong social institutions were also maintained by the Rajputs, Marathas and Sikhs. The need for common defence was one of the potent factors of village solidarity. As Baden-Powell observed: "In unsettled times, cultivation is hardly possible except within the reach of some chief's fortress or other place of refuge; and in those provinces where the open level country has allowed village settlements, the families keep together for mutual help. Each group

has to be prepared to defend itself against sudden attack. Accordingly, in many parts of India the village dwelling place has been built with mud walls and stout gates within which the cattle may be secured and the cultivators find refuge against a foray" (1896, p. 67). Bengal did not experience similar compulsions for defence at the grass-roots. This region was far from the direct routes of invaders to the subcontinent who entered through the North West. The initial fury of the invaders usually dissipated when they reached Bengal. Consequently, the demand in Bengal for security against foreign invaders is likely to be lower than that in other parts of South Asia. However, there are two reasons to hypothesize that villagers in west Bengal needed stronger organization than their counterparts in south and east Bengal. First, the nature of terrain in eastern and southern areas of Bengal discouraged prolonged occupation of the invaders. "Its swamps and marshes were uninviting, its unending maze of rivers and creeks are not easy to negotiate. The land approaches to it from the west were not so many... The Bengali rainy season was a terror for northern invaders" (Imam 1982, p.75). As compared to other parts of South Asia, depredations of invading armies and predatory hordes were less frequent in eastern and southern Bengal. Secondly the village in west Bengal was nucleated whereas the typical rural settlement in eastern and southern Bengal was linear and dispersed. It is easier to defend a nucleated settlement than a dispersed and linear settlement. In view of low probability of invasions and high costs of defence, it was not cost-effective to organise grass-roots defence organizations in south and eastern Bengal.

It is often hypothesized that a village in the vicinity of forests tends to be corporate for two reasons. First, the unity of villagers is often needed to drive away the wild animals that cause wide-spread losses to life and property. Secondly, communal action is needed to clear the dense forests for human habitation.

Historical sources refer to occasional attacks of wild animals in different parts of Bengal. Nevertheless, the design of houses in the settled areas in Bangladesh region clearly suggests that wild animals were not considered a major threat to life and property. In areas where threats of wild animals are critical, houses are built on stilts. In eastern and southern Bengal, houses were always built on the ground and not on stilts. It is, therefore, likely that the need for communal protection against wild animals was not strongly felt in Bangladesh region.

Eaton emphasizes the importance of "superior organizational skills and abundant manpower" which were necessary for transforming the region's formerly thick jungles into rice fields" (1994 p. 210). Eaton, however, does not differentiate between various types of forests which existed in different parts of Bengal. Broadly speaking, there were three types of forests in this region: (1) Hill forests, (2) Inland forests and (3) Littoral forests. The inland plains forests are parts of tropical moist deciduous forests which are locally known as *sal* forests. There were extensive *sal* forests throughout Bengal zone. The remnants of *sal* forests in Bengal delta could still be found in Dhaka, Tangail, Mymensingh, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Rajshahi and Comilla. It is easy to clear such forests. Apart from cutting trees, fires could be used in the dry season to burn the undergrowth. (GOB 1992, p. 10). Wood ash resulting from such fires also fertilize the surrounding land. Thus it is feasible to clear *sal* forests on individual initiative. Hill forests contain mixtures of many tropical evergreen and tropical deciduous trees occurring in association with bamboo jungles. It is counterproductive to clear the forest covers of the hills (Khan 1982, pp 39-41). Usually the valleys in such forests are cleared for cultivation. The experience of the Bengali migrants to Assam in early 20th century clearly indicates that no communal organization was needed for cultivation in the valleys of the hill forests. The experience of the settlement of Bengali immigrants in Assam was recounted by the Census Commissioner in 1921 in the following manner:

"Whither there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghias. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue troubles to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam valley during the past twenty five years. It looks like a marvel of administrative organization on the part of the Government, but it is nothing of the sort, the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of a huge body of ants" (Quoted in Hazarika 1994. p. 7). The history of the Bengali immigrants in Assam strongly suggests that clearing of lands in similar hill forest areas of Bengal was possible at low cost and on individual initiative. However, it is not easy to clear the mangrove forests that flourished in southern areas of Bengal. Such forests cannot be burnt and they renew themselves automatically. It was not sufficient to clear lands, it was also essential to embank the newly reclaimed land to protect it

from salinity intrusion. Drinking water was not easily available. This is why, tanks had to be dug for supply of drinking water. The settlement in mangrove forests therefore, needed considerable outlay. This did not necessarily call for strong communal organizations. The landlords in Barisal district provided the finance for clearing of forests in the area through a process of sub-infeudation. As a result, strong or cohesive institution at the grass-roots level did not grow in the reclaimed areas in south Bengal. The houses in the villages in Barisal were scattered and there was very little of collectivist life. The above analysis clearly suggests that the existence of forests in and around Bangladesh region did not encourage the formation of corporate rural settlements. The benefits of collective organization were low compared to its costs.

The perennial supply of water is an essential precondition for the survival of any human settlement. However, the relationship between the structure of human settlement and the source of water supply is complex. The existing theories on this relationship suffer from two shortcomings. First, because of the wide currency of the theory of oriental despotism, existing theories focus exclusively on the nexus between artificial irrigation and the structure of the state. Consequently the relationship between the source of water and the grass-roots social institutions was neglected in the available literature. Secondly, existing theories concentrate on artificial irrigation only and do not take into account the sources of water for daily use such as drinking and bathing.

Historical sources refer to the active role of state in constructing large irrigation schemes in ancient and medieval South Asia. Sudarshan Lake in South Gujrat which had a long history of 800 years of service to agriculture, Bhojpur lake built in the middle of the 11th century, and the canals built by the Nandas in Orissa clearly indicate that the State encouraged artificial irrigation in different parts of ancient India. Udayasagara reservoir in Mewar, Vijayanagara and Kamthana tank in South India, Jamuna canal of Firuz Tughluq, Nahar-i-Behest and Shah Nahr canals of Shahjahan and "Begari wah" canal in Sind attest to the construction and maintenance of artificial irrigation systems. Despite these large state-managed irrigation systems, there are two reasons to presume that village institutions played a significant role in providing artificial irrigation. First, most lands in South Asia were irrigated from small local sources rather than from large state-sponsored works. Daniel Thorner rightly

argues, canal networks have never been the outstanding feature of Indian crop production and Indian agriculture primarily depended on rainfall, local wells or ponds of the villages (Thorner 1966). However, historical evidence on small and local sources is scanty. Mukhia rightly points out "the rarity of references to such small-scale means of irrigation need not suggest the actual scarcity of these means", (1994, p. 74). Embanked reservoirs to store rain water which were locally known as tanks provided irrigation water to much of south India. A survey in Mysore in 1866 reported that 59.7 percent of land in Mysore was under tank irrigation (Stein 1994). Some of these tanks were large and necessitated the intervention of the state. Apart from Mysore, tanks were extensively used in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Gujrat, Malwa and Bundelkhand. The artificial irrigation system in South India was described by the distinguished historian K.A. Nilkanta Sastry in the following manner:

> "The importance of irrigation was well understood from early times, dams were erected across streams and channels taken off from them wherever possible. Large tanks were made to serve areas where there were no natural streams, and the proper maintenance of tanks was regularly provided for. The extension of agriculture was encouraged at all times by granting special facilities and tax concessions for specified periods to people who reclaimed land and brought it under cultivation for the first time" (1966, p.328).

Wells were the major source of irrigation in north India. However, the costs of well construction varied according to soil type. Consequently, more wells were constructed where soil was favourable (Bayly 1992, pp 80-83). In most cases small scale irrigation needed group action at the village level. In fact, some villages like Dube's Shamirpet owed their origins to the construction of village tanks (Dube 1955, p. 23). The village level organization for supervising tanks in a typical south Indian village was described in the following manner: "At present there are three Neerudis in the village, two of whom are Malas and one a Madiga. It is their duty to look after the tank bund, particularly to keep a watch on the flood gates... They should also periodically check the water-level in the tank and keep the superior village officers informed" (Dube 1955, p. 52). Secondly, cooperation at the grass-roots level is very often required for the efficient operation of large-scale irrigation systems. For example, Wade studied the operation of the canal system in Andhra Pradesh. He asserts that mere existence of an irrigation system is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for

a corporate village. Collective organizations emerge in those villages where risks to operation of irrigation are high. Such risks would go up where costs of exclusion from common-pool resources are high. The main findings of Wade's field investigation may be summarized as follows:

1. In villages located near the tail end of irrigation channel, the risks to irrigation is high. Such villages need strong corporate leadership.
2. In dry villages with fine, water retentive soils there are high grazing risks which tend to generate "intermediate level corporate organization".
3. At the top-end irrigated villages, both irrigation and grazing is secure and the level of corporate organization is at the lowest level (Wade 1988).

The above analysis clearly indicates that many villages in north and south India needed corporate organizations either to construct and maintain local level small-scale irrigation projects or to operate efficiently at local level large-scale irrigation systems. Because of the abundance of rainfall and enormous flows through the mighty rivers, the need for artificial irrigation was not at all felt in Bengal, particularly in southern and eastern areas. In many northern Indian villages, limited cooperation was needed for the supply of water for drinking and daily use. For example Bayly reports that only feasible form of well in areas of light soil is stone well and the cost of a stone well was more than five times the supposed annual expenditure of the family of a middling cultivator (1993, p. 80). In such villages, all villagers could not afford a well. The villagers needed a corporate leadership for regular provision of water for daily use. Anthropological studies in Birbhum district in West Bengal indicate that all villagers did not have unlimited access to tanks and wells in the village. "The only form of discrimination in this matter arises from the fact that the people of the lowest castes use the ponds near their homes so that a distinction naturally arises between the ponds used by the lowest castes and those used by the members of other castes. A similar situation occurs in the use of wells. Until thirty years ago there were only two wells, one belonging to the Zamindar and the other to one of the Baidyas" (Fukutake 1967, p. 149). In most villages in southern and eastern Bengal, each homestead had independent source of water for drinking and bathing purposes. In the

deltaic areas of Bengal, the houses were built either on the natural levees of the rivers or on lands raised by earth-filling. The residents of the levees had easy access to water in the river. The households outside the levees had tanks of their own because tanks had to be dug for earth-filling whenever a new home was built on low lands outside the levees. Beyond the deltaic areas most of the households procured water from wells which were either owned communally or by village influentials. In such areas, ostracism resulted in the denial of access to the source of water which was essential for survival. These facts suggest that the source of water supply influenced the structure of village organizations in a number of ways. However, the villages in south and east Bengal were free from the constraints of water for virtually all purposes. As a result, the villages in these areas are likely to be open.

The experience of south India suggests that in many villages corporate organizations also arose to regulate grazing rights. The regulation of grazing rights was not at all urgent in the deltaic Bangladesh where major crops are grown in flooded lands during the rainy season.

The economic realities behind corporate villages were often obscured by ideological propaganda. The *Brahmadeya* village in the Coromandel is a case in point. The *Brahmadeya* literally refers to a gift to Brahmans, specifically a grant of village income and management to Brahmans. There are two traditional explanations on the origins of the *Brahmadeya* villages in south India. First, it is argued that Brahman-dominated villages were imposed by the Pallava dynasty to perpetuate the Brahmanical order. Secondly, an alternative explanation maintains that peasants voluntarily accepted the domination of Brahmans. In reality, such villages were a reaction to internal security crisis which threatened the dominance of the existing peasant communities by the invading tribes (Kalabhra) and disrupted the existing order by the new immigrants (Stein 1994, pp. 81-85). The ideology of these Brahman dominated villages was provided by the devotional temple-centred forms of ritual. Some of the corporate villages might have been established by the state in the frontier areas to maintain order. Kautilya in his *Arthasastra* refers to formation of such villages. The experience of the *Brahmadeya* villages also suggests that some of these villages acted as "central place villages" by influencing the smaller or satellite villages to conform to social norms (Stein 1994).

The above analysis suggests that a wide variety of factors determine the degree of corporateness of village institutions. However, none of the factors which promoted corporateness in other areas of South Asia were present in the deltaic areas of south and eastern Bengal. The economic benefits of corporate institutions in rural settlements in areas which now constitute Bangladesh have been limited. There was no compulsion for management of common-pool resources like water or grazing rights. The threats of foreign invasion, internal insecurity and wild animals had been limited. On the other hand, the costs for group action for participating individuals are high because free-riders who do not share the costs can easily usurp the benefits. Free-riding tends to be less if ostracism from the village organization entails significant hardships. Compared to other areas of South Asia, ostracism in deltaic Bengal region was merely a nuisance and not a major threat to survival. The deltaic Bengal had abundant virgin lands which could be easily cleared and which were very fertile. In other areas of South Asia, virgin lands were very often marginal. Unlike their north Indian counterparts, the households in the Bangladesh region were self-sufficient in respect of water-supply. Because of the ease of new settlement, ostracism lost much of its sting in deltaic Bengal. The costs of corporate institutions far exceeded the benefits. Finally, the coercive power of a corporate village tends to be high when it is surrounded by corporate villages. In such an environment, ostracised individuals do not dare to defy the village authority in the fear that they would not be acceptable in other corporate villages (Popkin 1979, p. 43). Where a mixture of corporate and open villages exist, the coercive power of corporate village organizations is likely to be low because an ostracised individual can easily start a new life in a loosely structured rural settlement.

Historical evidence of last one hundred years suggests that the degree of corporateness of rural settlements in Bengal zone was much lower than that of north and south Indian villages. It also indicates that the degree of corporateness varied from eastern areas to western areas of Bengal. The census reports in the late nineteenth century Bengal record that villages in west Bengal particularly in Burdwan division and the areas adjoining Bihar were better organised than those in eastern Bengal. These reports are corroborated by the field work of anthropologists who report that settlement pattern of villages in west Bengal was nucleated whereas the structure of

rural settlements in the deltaic areas was linear and diffuse. These studies also indicate that village leadership was stronger in nucleated villages than in linear settlements (Mandelbaum 1990). There are two reasons to presume that similar pattern in the structure of villages prevailed in the past. First, historical records suggest that villages in west Bengal were larger than those in east Bengal. Secondly, there are several reasons to expect higher corporateness of villages in west Bengal compared to those in the east. First virgin lands in western areas were less fertile and water supply was less adequate in the summer. The setting up of a new household on individual initiative was therefore, more expensive in the western areas than in the eastern areas. The existence of a number of corporate villages in nearby Bihar influenced the villages in adjacent areas in west Bengal. Some of these villages were in reality satellite villages of larger rural settlements in the west. Moreover, foreign invasions were more frequent in western areas than in eastern areas. The benefits of defence organizations were therefore, higher in western Bengal. These factors caused a divergence in the pattern of structure of rural settlements in east and west Bengal.

In short, the villages, in north and south India were corporate whereas those in Bengal were loosely structured. However, there was regional difference in the degree of loosely-structured villages in Bengal. They tended to be less loose in the western areas and more loose in the eastern areas of Bengal.

Chapter 3

DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY

History, according to conventional wisdom, is not based on theories, but on "a corpus of ascertained facts". A historical fact is not, however, random in the statistical sense, it is always selected by historians with a frame of reference in mind. A historical fact is, therefore, "like a sack—it won't stand up till you 've put something in it" (Carr 1972, p. 9). Despite the express disdain of historians for theories, there are always implicit theoretical constructs in all historical narratives. "The long path of historical research", rightly pointed out North, "is strewn with bones of theories of the state developed by historians and political scientists" (1981, p. 20). Political evolution in Bengal could be better appreciated by making explicit the theories which are implicit in political narratives.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of theories on the origin and role of the state: contractual theories and predatory or exploitation theories. The contractual theories posit that the state is an agency for provision of services such as protection and justice and it has to enlist the support of its constituents in the face of competition of potential rivals (such as rival states and dynasties). The exploitation theories consider the state as an instrument of vested interest groups. Though the contractual theory of state is deeply rooted in South Asia's past, most social scientists and historians are predisposed to exploitation theories. The despotic mega-empire is the recurring theme in the canonical interpretation of South Asian history. The consensus of historians and social scientists on the centralized

despotic states obscured the regional variations in the political landscape of South Asia.

Exploitation paradigms on state in South Asia may be divided into two categories: centralized exploitation and decentralized exploitation theories. The centralized exploitation model was first formulated by Karl Marx (Marx and Engels 1962, Vol. I, pp 343-358). The intellectual origins of this theory can be traced back to classical economists like Adam Smith, James Mill, John Stuart Mill and Richard Jones who emphasized the despotic and centralized nature of Asiatic states. According to Marx, large centralized empires embracing sprawling watersheds were essential for oriental agriculture which was dependent on artificial irrigation. As he puts it, "This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which, in the Occident, drove private enterprise to voluntary association, as in Flanders and Italy, necessitated, in the Orient where civilization was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralizing power of Government. Hence an economical function devolved upon all Asiatic Governments the function of providing public works" (Marx and Engels 1962, p. 347). Because of its control over water supply, the state was so powerful that it established its absolute command over all resources by eliminating private property. These characteristics together formed what is known in the Marxist historiography as the Asiatic mode of production.

The recent research has raised several questions about the rele vance of Asiatic mode of production to South Asian history. First, the role of the state in irrigation in South Asia has been highly overrated because the bulk of irrigated area was served by small scale irrigation at local level and not by major state-sponsored irrigation works (Rudra 1988, pp. 17-18). Secondly, the power of all-India empires has often been exaggerated. As Srinivas argues, "Pre-British India, in spite of the fact that vast and sophisticated empires flourished in it, was characterized paradoxically by "pedestrian state", the state's duty to maintain law and order being confined to towns and to the few highways which existed. Supplementing this, the dominant castes maintained law and order at the local level" (1987, p. 9). Thirdly, Asiatic mode of production oversimplifies the complex property relations in land in South Asia. Despite Marx's assertion, the absence of private property in land is far from generally accepted view of Indian historians today (Mukhia 1994, p. 125). Fourthly, political

fragmentation in different parts of South Asia including Bengal is inconsistent with the thesis of oriental despotism. Fifthly, Marx assumed the existence of self-sufficient village communities. As Perry Anderson rightly observed, "The self-sufficiency, equality and isolation of the Indian village communities was thus always a myth; both the caste system within them and the State above them precluded either" (1974, p. 489). Finally, climatic and topographic conditions in large empires are not uniform everywhere; they vary from region to region. This is specially true about large empires in South Asia which usually encompassed arid deserts, lofty mountains, wet deltas and deep forests. Artificial irrigation might have been necessary in arid areas in north India, it is superfluous in wet areas like Bengal.

There is, however, a school of historians who maintains that artificial irrigation was extensive in ancient Bengal. According to Wilcox, agriculture in ancient Bengal was dependent on wide-spread networks of artificial irrigation. He characterized this irrigation as "overflow irrigation" which was effected by cuts in the banks of canals during the flood, (Wilcox 1930). There are two major weaknesses in Wilcox's hypothesis. First he assumed that all dead rivers in west and central Bengal were man-made canals. There is no historical evidence on such extensive excavation of canals. It is more likely that these channels were the relics of the old river systems in the moribund delta. Secondly, overflow irrigation could be used only for supplementary irrigation during the rainy season. Supplementary irrigation is needed in case of drought. Obviously canals would not have adequate water for overflow irrigation during a drought. It is, therefore, unlikely that such canals would be excavated for irrigation purposes. Wilcox himself conceded that canals in Bengal were needed not primarily for irrigation but for drainage and navigation. It is also doubtful whether extensive canal networks for drainage and navigation were needed in deltaic areas.

A second version of centralized exploitation model was presented by Wittfogel. The theory of hydraulic society developed by Wittfogel was obviously influenced by Marxian analysis of the causal link between irrigation and oriental despotism. Wittfogel distinguishes between a farming economy that involves small-scale irrigation (hydroagriculture) and a large-scale government-managed works of irrigation (hydraulic agriculture). The effective management of infrastructure in hydraulic societies involves an organizational web

which covers either the whole or at least the dynamic core of country's population. As a result those who control the network are uniquely prepared to wield political power. Such a government, in his view, is "stronger than the society" (Wittfogel 1957).

Despite the striking similarity of their conclusions, Marx and Wittfogel differed on two essential points. First, in Marx's view, oriental despotism arose to construct and maintain large networks of irrigation. Wittfogel was of the opinion that apart from artificial irrigation, protective installation (such as drainage canals and dykes for flood control, aqueducts for drinking water and navigation canals) and non-hydraulic works (e.g. walls and other structures of defence, highways etc.) also contributed to the formation of centralized states. Secondly, they differed with regard to role of village communities. In Marx's opinion, village communities had been the solid foundation of oriental despotism. Wittfogel was of the opinion that a village in the oriental society was peripheral and merely tolerated because of diminished administrative returns. Wittfogel maintained that oriental despotism was based on a genuine monopoly bureaucracy.

Wittfogel's theory suffers from the limitations of Marxian analysis of Asiatic mode of production enumerated above. Wittfogel believed that "oriental despotism persisted over millennia". This hypothesis is not consistent with the frequent ups and downs in the authority of large empires in the Orient. It is unlikely that a command economy can function indefinitely. As Hicks rightly pointed out, "A pure, or almost pure command economy can hardly exist excepting in an emergency for it is only in the emergency that a wide range of orders from the centre will be accepted" (Hicks 1969, p. 15). Wittfogel assumed that physical infrastructures were the only public goods provided by governments in oriental societies. Internal order and security were equally important public goods. Large empires may arise not only to provide irrigation but also to ensure security of large-scale trade and to resist invasion from outside. Thus the focus of Wittfogel's theory is too narrow to be realistic. Finally, physical conditions in areas like Bengal delta were radically different from arid areas where artificial irrigation was needed. Too much and not too little water is the main problem in the agrarian life of this zone. Wittfogel tried to defend his thesis by suggesting that in Bengal a centralized state was necessary to construct and maintain extensive flood-control works. Wittfogel exaggerated the extent and importance of flood control structures in Bengal. Wittfogel maintained

that by 1900 Bengal had 1298 miles of embankments(1957, p. 24) These embankments were widely scattered and not continuous and are not likely to provide reasonable flood protection to even 5 percent of flooded land in Bengal. No central machinery is needed for such widely dispersed and localized flood mitigation measures. On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of the people in Bengal throughout history lived with floods.

There are two major versions of decentralized exploitation paradigms. First, basing on anthropological research of Southall in Africa, Burton Stein (1994) presented the model of pyramidal segmented type of state in the context of south India. Secondly, Sharma (1985) propounded a model of a feudal system to explain the political system of empires in medieval India. The main strength of these paradigms is that they recognize that empires in India were not all-powerful unitary states. Except in the heydays of Moghul empire, no Indian state ever approximated the despotic centralism of Marx and Wittfogel's paradigm. It is doubtful whether unitary states of exploitation model could have existed prior to industrial revolution which provided the technology and resources for sustaining unitary states. The main features of pyramidally segmented state are as follows:

i. Proponents of this theory deny the organic entity of the unitary state. They maintain that within mega-empires local units or what they describe as segments retain their essential characteristics as segmental parts of a whole. As a result despite the existence of a central government, there are large number of peripheral units over which the centre exercised only a limited control. The authority of the centre varies from zone to zone, attaining the highest level of control in the central zone, less control in the intermediate zone and minimum control in the peripheral zone. Political control in such empires is not fixed but fluid and indeterminate

ii. In segmented political system, sovereignty is dual. It consists of actual political sovereignty or control and ritual hegemony or ritual sovereignty. In such states, ritual authority is concentrated in the king whereas the segments may exercise political authority. In Stein's view, political sovereignty corresponded to Indian view of *khastra* which is "a power of territorial character, exercised within a given territory and stopping at the frontier of the realm". On the other hand, ritual sovereignty is

enshrined in the ancient Indian precept of *Rajadharma* which enjoins on the king duties and obligations of a personal character. The ritual sovereignty of the king, in Stein's view, provided the essential unity in Pallava and Chola empires in South India.

iii. Local units were organised pyramidally in relation to the centre. A distinction is made between the pyramidal and hierarchical social structure. In the pyramidal structure, every legitimate kind of political authority and control are exercised at all levels, but these operate within smaller constituency as one moves from the higher level to lower level. In the hierarchical power structure, different levels or segments do not exercise same type of authority and control; the type of control varies from level to level. The pyramidal relationship explains how the smallest unit of political organization is linked to greater units of political organization of an ascending order (i.e. village, locality, supra-locality and kingdom). In South India basic segments of the political system were *nadus* under the leadership of chiefs who were variously known as *udaiyars*, *mummadi* and *muvenda-velar*. *Nadus* in the Chola empire varied in area from ten to three hundred square miles, the average number of village in a nadu in Tamil plain was about five. However, in some *nadus*, total number of villages often exceeded forty. Above the *nadus*, there were supra-local assemblies which were styled as *periyanadu*. The area covered by a supra-local institution varied from region to region. There were frequent references to existence of eighteen *nadus* in supra-local assemblies. There was a specialized administrative staff at the centre, but similar staff on a reduced level was repeated at intermediate and peripheral levels.

iv. Different levels in segmentary state are united together by their joint recognition of the ritual sovereignty of the highest central office. The flexible relationships in a segmentary state were sanctified by the sacral character of the rulership whether that of chieftainship or kingship.

There are two main attractions of the paradigm of pyramidally segmented state. First, it provides a more realistic assessment of the power of the empire in pre-industrial societies. Available technology did not permit the establishment of despotic centralism as envisaged

in the exploitation theories. Secondly, it provides a satisfactory explanation on how grass-roots institutions were linked to the centre. However, the model is not relevant for polities outside medieval South India. First in his model Stein emphasises the ideological basis of political system. In his opinion, the sacral character of the rulership provides durability to the flexible political arrangements of a pyramidally segmented state. Rulership cannot, however, assume sacral character if the rulers and subjects profess different religions. This model is, therefore, irrelevant for the Muslim empires in India where the kings were Muslims and most subjects were Hindus. Similar situation arose in Bengal when the Buddhist kings ruled for several centuries a population with Hindu majority. Secondly, pyramidal structure as envisaged in this theory is not found in other parts of South Asia specially in Bengal. The eastern and southern area of Bengal lacked corporate villages which were the basic ingredients of pyramidal power structure. It is not, therefore, surprising that Bangladesh region did not experience the emergence of sustainable empires.

Another decentralized model of exploitative system was presented by R.S. Sharma (1985). In his opinion, political system in India during the period 300-1200 A.D. was characterized by feudalism. Feudal system arose from the increasing land grants of the state to religious institutions such as Buddhist vihars, Hindu temples and the Brahmins. This resulted in the subjection of the peasantry to the intermediaries and in the peasant's dependence on them. It coincided with the decline of trade and commerce which in turn promoted self-sufficient rural economy. Sharma cites evidence to show that all components of western feudal order such as serfdom, manor, self-sufficient economic units and the feudalization of crafts and commerce existed in India. He concluded that the Pala empire which ruled in eastern India for more than four hundred years was based on feudal system.

There are several weaknesses of Sharma's model. First exemption from tax for the recipients of land grants did not imply the authority to collect taxes from others. On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that at least in some cases taxes were collected from recipients of land grants (Chakravarti, 1398 B.S.) Land grants, therefore, did not necessarily result in sub-infeudation. Secondly, Mukhia rightly points out, serfdom in the European sense did not at all exist in India. Because of high fertility of land and low subsistence level of the peasants in South Asia, a large share of agrarian

surplus could be collected by the state from free peasants. On the contrary, owing to shortage of labour, adequate surplus could not be generated in western Europe without serfdom that tied the peasants to the estates. Thirdly, Sharma's model is not relevant for much of Bengal. As Charkavarti suggests, beneficial tenures called *sasanas* and *agraharas* in Bengal, "never covered more than a fraction of the agricultural land, they did not touch the mass of cultivators in the country" (1943, p. 647). Furthermore, in eastern Bengal most of land grants were confined to parcels of land rather than to whole villages. By contrast, a land grant in Bihar often consisted of hundreds of villages. For example, Nalanda vihara alone had ownership over 214 villages. Grant of scattered land in different villages was not at all conducive to the development of a feudal system in Bengal. It is thus obvious that land tenure system in most regions in Bengal was significantly different from the rest of the Pala empire.

The foregoing analysis suggests that exploitation theories do not at all provide satisfactory explanation on origin and role of state in Bengal zone. These theories are new and by-products of western social sciences. By contrast, contractual theories on the state are deeply rooted in Bengal's heritage. It is not correct to presume that the idea of social contract is an innovation of Locke and Rousseau. One of the earliest formulations of this idea can be traced in the doctrine of *Mahasammata* (the great chosen one) in the Buddhist theology. The Buddhists believe that at the earliest stage of civilization, men used to live in a state of bliss where there was no hunger, private property, family or government. As class distinctions arose, men lost their pristine purity. This in turn led to proliferation of crimes. To solve these problems, the people met together and resolved to entrust one of them with the maintenance of order on promise to pay him a share of the produce of their fields. This is why, the king is known as the "Great Chosen One" or the *Mahasammata*. According to the interpretation of Buddhist theologians, the term *raja* (king) was derived from verb *ranjayati* i.e. (he who pleases) and the fundamental task of the king was to please the people (Basham 1959). Another popular political doctrine in ancient India was the *matsanaya* (a condition where the big fish (powerful) swallowed the little fish (weak) or a state of anarchy). According to this doctrine, kingship was instituted to ward off anarchy. This doctrine was invoked in the Khalimpur copper plate of Dharmapala which reports that Gopala, the founder of the Pala dynasty was elevated to

kingship by the *Prakritis* (who were probably local leaders or the people) "to put an end to *matsanaya*" (Khan 1989). Similar elective kingship is reported in Assam in the tenth century A.D. (Dutta 1986). Thus a contractual theory of the origin of the state would be wholly consistent with the political traditions in Bengal zone.

Because of their preoccupations with all-India empires, modern social scientists in South Asia have largely ignored the contractual theories of the state which are enshrined in the ancient doctrines of *Mahasammata* and *Matsanaya*. The underlying assumption of ancient contractual theories is that the sustainability of a state is contingent on its benefits and costs. However, implicit economic calculus of contractual theories was not made explicit till the emergence of the public choice literature .In recent literature, two types of contractual theories can be easily discerned: (1) spontaneous order and (2) neo-classical theory of state. The theory of spontaneous order postulates that conventions are established on the basis of common experience of the members of a community. Conventions are not always economically efficient. Nevertheless, conventions became self-perpetuating and they ultimately become norms (Sugden 1989). This paradigm may be appropriate for small polities which are stable over time. However, this model is irrelevant for highly unstable polities in Bengal zone.

The neo-classical theory of the state is based on the following assumptions (North 1981). First, there is an exchange process between the state and the ruled. The state offers a group of services for revenue. While the exploitation theories were preoccupied with physical infrastructure (such as irrigation), the neo-classical theories emphasize the services of social infrastructure such as protection and justice. Individuals will buy the services of the state only when the tax for such services is less than costs individuals will have to incur to provide similar services for himself or if the individual on his own is unable to provide such services. Secondly, the aim of the state is to maximize its wealth by raising as much revenue as possible. However, there are two constraints on state's wealth maximization: (1) competitive constraint, and (2) transaction cost constraint. The first constraint arises from the fact that there always exist potential rivals of a state who could provide similar set of services. The rivals may come from outside; rivals could also arise from inside. Individuals with command over sufficient resources to acquire military capability are always potential rivals. To keep the potential

rivals at bay, the state would either buy them off with special concessions or would like to enlist the support of its constituents by providing the best service at a low cost. Transaction costs arise from the specific terms of governance. These costs relate to monitoring, metering and collection of taxes. Enforcement poses no problem when it is in the interest of the individual to pay taxes. However, individuals always prefer to cheat on taxes. The state has, therefore, to employ agents to collect taxes. Total collection of revenue is, therefore, significantly influenced by transaction costs. Thirdly, the state is a monopolist. It is defined by North as an "organization with a corporative advantage in violence, extending over a geographic area whose boundaries are determined by the power to tax constituents". In pricing its services, the state often acts as a discriminating monopolist with a view to maximizing its revenue. Because of the difference in opportunity costs and bargaining power of different constituents groups, the state strikes different bargains with different groups.

The foregoing assumptions are flexible enough to explain wide variations in structures of the state. From the historical point of view, the following conclusions of the neo-classical model deserve special attention.

1. Order may prevail even in stateless societies. A dense social network with informal social structures acts as the substitute for the state and formal rules. Such societies are characterized by high information costs. Kinship ties, therefore, act as the central insurance, protection and enforcement mechanisms of primitive societies.
2. The size of state is related to type of revenue. States are likely to be larger where revenue collection is easy. Furthermore, in some cases type of revenue itself determines the optimum size of the state. Friedman (1977) argues that if trade is the major revenue source, the state will be large and if rent is the principal source, the state would be small.
3. Status quo in the structure of state may continue as long as there is no change in the opportunity cost of the constituents or in the relative strength of competitive states. This implies that the monopoly of a state remains undisturbed if there is no invasion from outside or insurrection from inside. The existing order may be destabilized by technological innovation, demographic change, and shifts in transaction costs etc. Usually

the coercive power of the state results in apathy and acceptance of the existing rules, even if they are oppressive.

4. The strength of the state is contingent on the efficacy of its substitutes. As North (1981) predicts, "The closer the substitutes, the fewer degrees of freedom the ruler possesses, and the greater the percentage of incremental income that will be retained by its constituents" (p. 27). The internal substitutes may come from the ruler's own agents who may attract supporters from among the constituents by offering a more acceptable division of the existing rents or from wealthy individuals who acquire military power. The costs of maintenance of status quo are inversely related to perception of legitimacy of the existing system. If the system is perceived to be fair, the enforcement costs are reduced.

The neo-classical theory of the state suggests that small marginal changes may ultimately lead to restructuring of the polity. The structure of the same state may change over time. An analysis of the available evidence also indicates that the structure of the state in Bengal zone was not static. The polity in pre-Muslim Bengal differed significantly from the polity during the Muslim rule.

There are three distinct features of the polity in ancient Bengal. First, ancient Bengal did not produce any all-India empire. This stands in striking contrast to the experience of other areas of South Asia which were the centres of large empires. Secondly, within Bengal zone itself there were perceptible regional variations in the strength and power of political organizations. The sphere of influence of neighbouring mega-empires often extended to parts of western and central Bengal. On the contrary, eastern and southern Bengal experienced endemic political fragmentation. Thirdly, because of the absence of a strong central government throughout history, political instability was rife in the Bengal delta. Small principalities bloomed and withered like wild flowers in this region.

Political fragmentation as a distinct feature of Bengal's history is ignored in the traditional literature which assumed that the course of history in this zone was indistinguishable from the mainstream in South Asia. According to nationalist historians, who sought to glorify the achievements of their ancestors, polities in Bengal zone were dominated by large empires for more than two thousand years from the Gangaridai empire in the 4th century B.C. to Mughal empire in

the 18th century A.D. (Majumder, 1981). Some of these empires originated in north India and extended their sway to Bengal; most of these empires are believed to have sprung from the soil of Bengal itself. This empire-centric interpretation of Bengal which is clearly contradicted by epigraphic evidence precluded a true appreciation of political institutions in this zone.

The legendary Gangaridai empire is usually cited as the earliest achievement of the political genius of the people of Bengal. Gangaridai is described by the classical writers as the "greatest of all nations" in South Asia. Even Alexander the Great was reportedly deterred by the might of the Gangaridai empire. Classical writers also attest to the existence of a contemporary empire in eastern India which is known as Prasioi. It is not clear whether Prasioi and Gangaridai were parts of the same empire or independent empires. Curtis, for example, refers to Gangaridai and Prasioi as two nations under one king. If Gangaridai was an independent state, it would lie to the east of Prasioi which extended as far as the Ganges. A kingdom containing the areas to the east of the Ganges in the Bengal delta is not likely to be very large. Subsequently, parts of Bengal were occupied by the Maurya empire (321-185 B.C.) and the Gupta empire (331-600 A.D.) The base of both Maurya and Gupta empires lay in Bihar. Epigraphic evidence suggests that the spheres of influence of these empires were confined to the western and central Bengal. Moreover, historical evidence refers to existence of independent kingdoms in eastern and southern Bengal (e.g. Kotalipara inscription in Faridpur). The Gupta empire in eastern India was succeeded by the empire of Sasanka (600-637 A.D.). Historical evidence clearly indicates that the Bhadra dynasty and not emperor Sasanka ruled in eastern Bengal. The authority of Sasanka was confined to western and central Bengal. Finally, it is asserted that the Pala empire (750-1162 A.D.) which lasted for more than four hundred years was an empire of the Bengalis. It is true that the Pala empire occasionally embraced parts of north Bengal. Nevertheless it was primarily a Bihar-based empire. All the inscriptions of the early Pala rulers were issued from Bihar and at least during first two hundred years of Pala rule not a single inscription has been found to refer to the Pala occupation of south-eastern Bengal. On the contrary, epigraphic evidence attests to the existence of the independent kingdom of the Bhadras in eastern Bengal. Except for a short spell (between 1043-1075 A.D.), eastern and southern Bengal eluded the grasp of

the Pala overlords (Chowdhury 1967). Furthermore, the last Pala king ruled in Bihar and not in Bengal. The Pala rulers had no fixed capital. Sharma identified the following nine seats of royal authority: (1) Patliputra (2) Madagiri (3) Ramavati (in Maldah district) (4) Bata Parvataka (Bhagalpur district) (5) Bilaspur (6) Hardam (7) Shahsasha-Ganda (8) Kanchanpur and (9) Kapilvasak (Sharma 1985). None of these places was located in eastern and southern Bengal and only one lay in central Bengal. These facts clearly suggest that the political base of Pala empire lay in Bihar.

Parts of central and western Bengal were adjacent to Bihar. Consequently, the Bihar-based all-India empires occasionally incorporated the neighboring areas in western and central Bengal. However, these areas became independent whenever the central authority was weak. The sphere of influence of these Bihar-based empires rarely extended to southern and eastern Bengal. The political landscape of eastern and southern Bengal was dotted with small kingdoms. The following eleven dynasties have so far been identified to have ruled in Bangladesh region from the fifth to twelfth century AD: (1) kingdom of Vainayagupta (6th century), (2) Faridpur kings (6th century), (3) Bhadra dynasty (circa 600-650 AD), (4) Khadaga dynasty (circa 650-700 AD), (5) Natha dynasty (circa 700 AD), (6) Rata dynasty (circa 700 AD), (7) Deva Dynasty (circa 750-800 AD), (8) the rulers of Harikela (circa 800-900 AD), (9) Chandra dynasty (circa 900-1045 AD), (10) Varman dynasty (circa 1080-1150 AD), and (11) Pattikera dynasty (circa 1000-1100 AD). An analysis of historical evidence suggests that these kingdoms, though small, were sovereign and not tributaries of all-India empires. Historical evidence, therefore, indicates that the influence of all-India empires which originated outside Bengal gradually decreased from the west to the east.

Throughout its history, political instability was rife in ancient Bengal. During the period 500-1150 A.D., a ruling dynasty in eastern and southern Bengal on an average lasted less than 80 years. Political evolution in Bangladesh region stands in striking contrast to that of neighbouring Bihar and other regions in South Asia. Bihar in the ancient period witnessed the emergence of large empires like the Nandas, the Mauryas, Guptas and Palas. In Assam the militarist Ahom rulers succeeded in building a strong empire which lasted for about six hundred years (13th to 19th century A.D.). Similarly other regions of South Asia also experienced the rise of large empires (e.g.

the Pallavas and Cholas in South India) in different phases of their history. By contrast, political entities in Bengal zone particularly in eastern and southern areas were always small and short-lived.

The sustainability of a large empire is contingent on the capacity to generate resources for the upkeep of a big army. Resources for ancient empires are usually extracted from trade and agriculture. There is a strong symbiotic relationship between trade and large empires. However, the direction of causality may run both ways. Large empires need traders for revenue. On the other hand, traders need a strong state for protection of property and contract. In case of overland trade, the state has to ensure security for the movement of merchandise. Large states are essential for prosperity of overland trade. In Bengal, much of the trade was maritime. The deltaic areas in Bengal were easily accessible to the sea through the network of inland waterways. Consequently, traders in Bengal did not require the umbrella of a large empire.

Traditional historical literature refers to flourishing foreign trade in ancient Bengal (Islam, 1984). A scrutiny of the historical sources, however, indicates that the extent of trade in ancient Bengal has been exaggerated. First, large scale trading activities would have contributed to significant monetization of the economy. Historical sources clearly suggest that the monetization of the economy was shallow for more than one thousand years—from the fourth to the fifteenth century. Fa-hien, the Chinese traveller, reported that cowrie (shell) was the principal medium of exchange in the fourth century Bengal. The records of the Sena rulers in the 12th century indicate that kings used to make gifts in cowries. Minhajuddin, the Turkish historian mentioned that in thirteenth century Bengal, all economic transactions were made in cowries. Ibn Batuta, the Moorish traveller, who visited Bengal in the fourteenth century, noted that the cowries were the principal medium of exchange in Bengal. Ma huan, a fifteenth century traveller also records the preponderance of cowries in economic transactions in Bengal. Local traders had very limited role in foreign trade of Bengal which was monopolized by traders from abroad. The benefit of trade in Bengal was likely to be limited. Secondly, historians note a significant decline of trading in South Asia since the fall of the Roman empire in the fifth century. The sharp fall in foreign trade in Bengal is particularly evident during five hundred years from the eighth to thirteenth century (Roy 1400 B.S.). This secular decline in trade is attributed to the disruption of

the Mediterranean trade in the wake of the Arab dominance of South Asia's foreign trade. The foregoing analysis suggests that role of trade in determining the size of the polity in Bengal delta was likely to be minimal.

The standard assumption of neo-classical theory is that there are economies of scale in the expansion of a state (North 1981, p. 23). It is argued that a larger state can provide security and protection to a wider territory at a cheaper cost. Historical experience of Bangladesh region suggests diseconomies of scale in the expansion of a polity. There are four factors which set apart the experience of Bangladesh region from other regions of South Asia. First the enforcement cost of a political system in Bangladesh region is high. Since corporate villages were conspicuously absent in Bangladesh, there was no grass-roots organization for the enforcement of law and order or the collection of land revenue. There was no headman in the villages of Bangladesh. Furthermore, village officials in the traditional sense were unknown. In much of South Asia, village headman and village officials ran the administration at the grass-roots level. The villages in the rest of South Asia were linked to the central government through intermediate organizations such as *nadu* and *periyanadu*. As Dube points out, "The administrative system was organized on the basis of grouping of villages, each having its recognized leader" (Dube 1955, p. 2). Neither village governments nor groupings of villages existed in deltaic Bengal. Secondly, information costs of administration in deltaic Bengal were high. The rural settlements in this region were dispersed whereas the villages in much of South Asia were nucleated. Information could be easily collected in nucleated settlements. However, collection of information on cultivation in dispersed settlements entails additional time and search. Thirdly, because of the abundance of uncultivated land and low cost of bringing such land under cultivation in Bengal delta, it was easy to migrate from one area to another area. Too much exploitation is likely to be counterproductive in this environment. Finally, the manoeuvrability of the armed forces was limited because of the peculiarities of the deltaic terrain. Much of Bengal delta was a wetland criss-crossed by innumerable rivers, streams and creeks. The mode of transportation varies with water level. Bangladesh, it has been rightly pointed out, "is a small country of long distances" (Novak 1993, p. 38). Bengal delta is a difficult place to travel. The costs of defending a large state in such terrain increase with its size.

States in Bengal delta in the ancient period were not only small but also unstable. Small states are not necessarily unstable. They are likely to survive so long as they do not face any emergency. The major threat of small states in the Bengal delta came from foreign invasions. Small states in Bengal delta were surrounded by large and strong states. Invaders came not only from the west (e.g. the Maurya, Guptas, Palas, Rashtrakutas, Cholas etc.) but also from the north (e.g. the Varmans and the Palas in Assam) as well as the east (Arakan and Tripura). Another major weakness of a small state is the ease of rebellion from within. Whenever the constituents of a small state are dissatisfied, they can easily organize resistance. Small states in Bengal delta were not well equipped to face the emergencies of invasions from outside or rebellion from inside. Both competitive constraint and transaction cost constraint impeded small state's ability to generate resources for overcoming emergencies. The mortality rate of small states was, therefore, high.

The size of polity in Bengal delta expanded significantly since the establishment of the Muslim rule in the thirteenth century. The Muslim rulers succeeded in unifying most of the areas in Bengal. This new trend in the political life in Bengal zone may be attributed to two factors. First, the policing capability of all India-empires was vastly enhanced by the introduction of new military technology. The army prior to the establishment of the Muslim rule in India was pedestrian. Locally bred horses were not abundant and suitable for cavalry. As a result, horses had to be imported at a great cost from Persia and Arabia. The military superiority of the early Muslim rulers was based on swift cavalry. However, the competitive edge of the cavalry was lost as the rivals of Delhi-based empires started using cavalry. The Mughals who came to South Asia at a later stage had to introduce a more powerful technology to maintain their hegemony. This new technology was the field artillery which was very costly (Rothermund 1988). Because of its dependence on the new type of artillery, Mughal empire is very often styled as "the gun-powder empire". This transition from pedestrian army to swift cavalry and field artillery considerably enhanced central government's striking power. This made possible prolonged sway over far-flung areas like Bengal. Secondly, the establishment of the Muslim rule in South Asia coincided with a remarkable expansion of both inland and foreign trade. By restoring law and order, the Delhi-based all-India empires stimulated inland trade. Foreign trade in the Indian ocean

picked up with the revival of international trade in Europe. The expansion of trade increased remarkably the revenue potentials of the rulers in Bengal. Apart from revenue, traders also provided easy access to credit. As Eaton points out: "In fact, the Marwaris and Mughals collaborated in the conquest of Bengal. Where the Mughals provided the Marwaris with the political security essential for transacting business, the latter provided the Mughals with financial capital obtained through their network of fellow caste members residing all over northern India" (Eaton 1994, p. 156).

The gradual elimination of small polities by a centralized state in Bengal zone since the thirteenth century was a significant departure from her political tradition. This marked the transition from contractual polities to a predatory or exploitative polity. There are two obviously exploitative features of the new political order. First, throughout history, Bengal zone had experienced plunder of resources by foreign invaders. However, the incursions of pedestrian armies were sporadic and short-lived. As a result resources raised by small kingdoms in the Bengal delta remained in these kingdoms. Equipped with a superior military technology, the overlords in Delhi since the thirteenth century established a system of continuous drain of resources from Bengal zone. There were two types of rulers in medieval Bengal: appointed governors of Delhi-based all India empires or independent kings. Unlike the independent kings in ancient Bengal, the rulers in medieval Bengal could not be oblivious to political realities in north India. They would not survive so long as a strong central government existed in Delhi. They were, therefore, deeply enmeshed in north Indian politics. They had to deploy all their resources and energies in an unequal competition with the mighty military machine in the north. They, therefore, had an insatiable demand for revenue. The governors of the Muslim empires in the north were also under continuous pressure for remittance of ever-increasing resources. The dilemma of the Delhi-based empires was succinctly summarized by Bayly in the following manner: "The rulers required a constant expansion of revenue by conquest or agricultural growth to satisfy aspirations of the nobility and official classes. If they could not provide office, honour and land grants, then its own servants began to lose the will to play the Delhi-game" (1993, p. 11). The system depended on the ability of the state to extract in cash as much as 40 percent of the value of total agricultural product. Economic explotation was, therefore, intensified in medieval Bengal.

According to an estimate, revenue/GDP ratio was about 43.8 percent in the hey days of the Moghul rule in Bengal (Khan 1992).

Secondly, the medieval rulers in Bengal established a new system for collection of revenue. Outwardly it resembles a bureaucratic system because the collectors would be easily changed by the rulers. In fact, it was a system of agency for collection of revenue without the rights of feudal lords. The Muslim rulers in Bengal bifurcated the military and fiscal functions. The army was run by the immigrant Muslim warlords. The fiscal functions were assigned to Hindu landlords who were known as Chowdhurys, Majumdars and Zamindars. The Hindu landlords in medieval Bengal were not feudatories or sub-infeudatories in the European sense, they were merely intermediaries who established a link between the immigrant rulers and local population. The Muslim rulers in Bengal preferred the Hindus specially the Kyasthas for collection of revenue for two reasons. First, local Hindu zamindars had detailed information on revenue in their areas. In the absence of well-defined village organizations, these local intermediaries were essential for collection of revenue from dispersed settlements. Secondly, the Hindu zamindars were politically powerless and were easily manipulated by their overlords. According to Salimullah, Murshid Quli Khan, an eighteenth century ruler "appointed none but Bengali Hindus in the collection of revenue because they were most easily compelled by threats or punishments to disclose their malpractices and their confederates, and their pusillanimity secured from insurrection or combination against the state" (Quoted in Rahim 1967, Vol. II p. 163). The preference for the Kayasthas may be attributed to the fact that they had been the dominant landholding caste prior to Muslim conquest and had absorbed the descendants of Bengal's old ruling dynasties.

The main attraction of the intermediary system for Muslim rulers in Bengal was that the intermediaries could be changed easily. On the other hand, the insecurity of their assignment forced the intermediaries to focus exclusively on their short term gains. They, therefore, tried to exact as much rent as possible in the shortest possible time. They were apprehensive that they might be replaced at any time by their competitors in the neighbouring areas. They constantly tried to eliminate potential rivals so that they could remain indispensable in their areas. The rent-seeking intermediaries, therefore, actively promoted factionalism (*daladali*) which become an art in rural Bengal. As a nineteenth century British administrator observed "social ambition

fired rival claimants for the leadership of their little circles, and in every village there were generally faction feuds raging" (Carstairs 1912, p. 26).

Despite the shift from contractual polity to predatory polity, political instability continued in medieval Bengal. Lack of corporate institutions at grass-roots level perpetuated political instability in the ancient period. The problems were compounded by the medieval rulers. They did not remove the administrative vacuum in the rural areas which existed before the establishment of the Muslim rule. On the contrary, they exacerbated the problem by generating relentless factionalism in the rural areas by appointing the Kyasthas as intermediaries for the collection of revenue. The continuous drain of resources further undermined the polity in Bengal zone.

In the first century of Muslim rule, the average reign of a ruler was about 5.5 years, during the period 1342-1575 A.D., it was about 9 years. In the fifteenth century, the Abyssinian palace guards murdered four kings in less than a decade. Rampant political instability illustrates the apathy of the common people to the fate of their political masters. As emperor Babur noted in the sixteenth century, "it is a singular custom in Bengal that there is little of hereditary descent in succession to the sovereignty. Whoever kills the king and succeeds in placing himself on that throne is immediately acknowledged as king; all the amirs, soldiers and peasants instantly obey and submit to him, and consider him as being as much as their sovereign as they did their former prince, and obey his orders implicitly. The people of Bengal say, "we are faithful to the throne; whoever fills the throne we are obedient and true to it" (Quoted in Rahim 1963, Vol. I, p.244). Abul Fadl, the Moghul court historian, described Bengal as *Bulghakkhana*—the "house of turbulence". He attributed the endemic dissension to corrupting influence of the climate on the inhabitants. In the same vein, Shah Niamat Ullah Firuzpuri, wrote in the seventeenth century:

"Bengal is a ruined and doleful land
Go offer the prayers to the dead, do not delay
Neither on land nor water is there rest
It is either the tiger's jaws or the crocodile's gullet"

(Translated by Eaton, 1994, p. 169)

The Portuguese traveller Tom Piores who came to Bengal in the sixteenth century noted that the people in the Far East believed that

the Bengalees were treacherous (Mukhapadhaya 1980). The same impression was conveyed by Macaulay in the nineteenth century with a rhetorical flourish: "What the horns are to the buffalo, what the sting is to the bee, what beauty according to the Greek song is to woman, deceit is to the Bengalee. Large promises, smooth excuses, elaborate tissues of circumstantial falsehood, chicanery, perjury, forgery are the weapons, offensive and defensive of the people of the Lower Ganges" (Quoted in Chaudhuri, 1987, p. 382).

An analysis of political evolution in Bengal indicates that earliest forms of polity in the ancient period are likely to be contractual. The predatory form of state was superimposed at a later stage in the medieval period. Nevertheless the forces which promoted contractual structure of polity could not be altogether eliminated or suppressed. As a result political instability in Bengal continued despite the crystallization of predatory structure of the state.

Chapter 4

DYNAMICS OF PROSELYTIZATION

Bangladesh is an outlier to the domain of Islam. Though this region contains one out of every eight Muslims in the world, she is physically separate from the heart-land of the faithful that forms a contiguous landmass stretching across the globe from Mauritania to Pakistan and from Turkey to Somalia. The preponderance of the Muslims in this region poses several unresolved puzzles in the history of Islam and South Asia.

The physical environment and social milieu of Bengal is radically dissimilar from that of a typical Muslim country. The heart-land of Islam is located in an arid and semi-arid zone. Bengal, on the contrary, is a wet delta intersected by innumerable rivers and characterized by a monsoon climate. Islam flourished in the physical and social milieu of caravan cities. Xavier de Planhol described Islam as "a religion of town-dwellers and merchants propagated by the nomads, scornful of the land and those who work it" (1957, p. 126). By contrast, Islam in Bengal was the religion of the agriculturists, woodcutters, fishermen and boatmen who lived in rural areas.

The preponderance of the Muslims in Bengal stands out in striking contrast to its failure in converting the infidels in much of South Asia. As Titus observes, "...so far as the conversion of India as a whole is concerned, Islam signally failed. In no other country save China where her arms and missionaries have gone has she accomplished so little in proportion to the population" (1959, p. 7). It is, therefore, a puzzle in South Asia's history that Hinduism which

defended itself so successfully against Islam in much of South Asia failed to arrest Islam's widespread diffusion in Bengal.

The explanations for this puzzle have been complicated by the virtual silence of historical records on spread of Islam in Bengal. Traditional chronicles in mediaeval Bengal which were composed by the courtiers to extol the achievements of their masters ignored the gradual diffusion of Islam in Bengal. There are only incidental references to spread of Islam in the chronicles, hagiographies and literary sources. Owing to meagreness of historical data, the accounts of the spread of Islam in Bengal are essentially guesses based on fragmentary and anecdotal evidence. Opinions, therefore, vary sharply on most of the issues relating to Muslim preponderance in Bengal. According to a school of historians, the Muslims in Bengal are the descendants of Muslim immigrants from west Asia who were attracted to this region by its economic affluence. The anthropologists, on the other hand, maintain that the Muslims of Bengal are racially akin to Bengali Hindus and are likely to be offspring of local converts. Historians also differ on the motivations for conversion to Islam in Bengal. The debate was occasionally coloured by caste prejudices. The Muslim historians in Bengal viewed the hypothesis of low-caste origin of Muslims in Bengal as a sinister design of the British and Hindu historians to denigrate their forefathers (Rahim 1963, vol. I, p. 57).

In fact, the census of 1872 triggered the debate on the origins of the Muslims in Bengal. Prior to Bengal's first census in 1872, it was usually assumed that the religious composition of population in Bengal was broadly similar to the neighbouring provinces of South Asia where the Hindus constituted a distinct majority. The popular perception was that the Muslims of Bengal like the British rulers in the nineteenth century were a "handful of foreigners" (Ali 1985, vol. IB, p. 750). The census of 1872 revealed that the Presidency of Bengal was the home of more than sixteen million Muslims. Beverley, the Superintendent of the census of 1872 realized that the existence of such a large Muslim population cannot be explained by immigration from outside. There is, however, no direct historical evidence on the expansion of Islam in Bengal. Beverley, therefore, relied on indirect anthropological evidence on the Muslims of Bengal. According to Beverley, there is a striking similarity in the social position, physique, manners and customs between the Muslims and low-caste Hindus. He, therefore, attributed

the expansion of Islam to conversion of numerous low-caste Hindus in Bengal.

Beverley's casual empiricism was later supported by elaborate anthropometric surveys of Herbert Risley (1915). He divided the population of South Asia into seven categories on the basis of three criteria—cephalic index (breadth of head as % of its length), nasal index (breadth of nose as % of its length) and stature. According to Risley, the Muslims of Bengal belong to Mongolo-Dravidian ethnic group which is "probably a blend of Dravidian and Mongoloid elements with a strain of Indo-Aryan blood in the higher group". He divided the population of Bengal into fourteen categories. On the basis of nasal index, he suggested that the Muslims of eastern Bengal had closer resemblance to lower castes (like the Pod, Koch and Chandals) than the higher castes like the Brahmins. Risley, therefore concluded that the Muslims of eastern Bengal were converts from the low caste Hindus.

The Beverley-Risley thesis on local origins of the Bengali Muslims was first challenged by Khondkar Fazle Rubbee (1895), who himself was a scion of the immigrant Muslim aristocracy. His arguments may be divided into two categories: (1) weaknesses of anthropometric surveys, and (2) historical evidence on Muslim immigration to Bengal. Rubbee highlighted three weaknesses of Risley's anthropometric survey. First, he argues that Risley's data are biased. His sample of the Muslims of Bengal was confined to 185 poor Muslims, mostly convicts in jails. Rubbee alleges that Risley instructed his assistant to exclude from his survey upper class Muslims and those who possessed regular features. Secondly, Rubbee maintains that Risley ignored variations among the Muslims of Bengal by lumping them into one category while Risley himself took into account variations among the Hindus by collecting separate measurements for thirteen categories of Hindus. Thirdly, Rubbee argued that the physical characteristics of original Muslim immigrants have undergone considerable changes "owing to their intermingling with other races and the effects of climate, soil, food and modes of life and in consequence of their professions and habits during a long process of time coupled with hard life and poverty which was imposed on them". He maintained that despite these mutations, there exists a material difference between the physical constitution and appearance of Muslims of immigrant descent and those of Hindu descent.

Rubbee argues that there is no direct historical evidence on large-scale conversion of Hindus to Islam while there is indisputable evidence of immigration of Muslims from Afghanistan, Turkistan, Iran, Arabia, and distant parts of India to Bengal during the uninterrupted Muslim rule in India for a period of 562 years. He also referred to two types of indirect evidence on foreign origin of the Muslims in Bengal. First the fact that numerous towns, villages, market places, parganas and districts are named after Muslim settlers indicates that a large number of Muslims came from outside. This hypothesis is supported by the existence of rent-free estates which were granted to Muslim immigrants by the Muslim rulers. Finally, Rubbee maintained that the dialects and pronunciation of Bengali Muslims were different from those of their Hindu counterparts.

While Rubbee was right in highlighting the weaknesses of Risley's anthropometric survey, he did not at all succeed in proving that all Bengali Muslims were immigrants from outside. The silence of the historical records on conversion of the Hindus to Islam does not necessarily imply that such conversions did not at all take place. The historical records of medieval Bengal focus exclusively on the Muslim rulers and their courtiers and ignore altogether the life of common people. It is not at all unlikely that gradual conversion of the Hindus in rural Bengal would go altogether unnoticed in the historical records. The Muslim names of many towns and villages in Bengal merely indicate that immigrant Muslims dominated political life. They do not at all prove that the immigrant Muslims were in a majority. The linguistic differences between the Hindus and the Muslims should not be over-played. Obviously dialects vary from region to region. However, the fact that the same dialect was spoken by both Hindus and Muslims in a region indicates that the dialects were not shaped by the language of the immigrants alone.

The literary sources in medieval Bengal contradict Rubbee's contention that most of the Muslims were offspring of immigrants from west Asia. The very fact that the writers in the 14th and 15th century felt the urge of writing books on Islam in Bengali shows that there was already a sizeable Bengali-speaking Muslim population. (Huq 1983). Had Islam been confined to immigrants alone, there would not have been any demand for an Islamic literature in the vernacular. The composition of the book "Kifayat-ul-Musallin" by the seventeenth century poet Shaikh Muttalib is a case in point. It is related by Shaikh Muttalib that his mentor Moulavi Rahmatullah en-

trusted the task of writing this book to him when the Muslims in a congregation sought Moulavi Rahmatullah's help in producing a religious manual in Bengali so "that they could perform duties according to scriptures" (Roy 1983, p. 76).

Methodological weaknesses of Risley's anthropometric surveys which were first pointed out by Rubbee have also been emphasized in subsequent studies. In spite of these methodological weaknesses, the main findings of Risley's survey on Bengali Muslims could not be discarded because they are supported by all subsequent anthropometric surveys. P.C. Mahalanobis (1927) and B.S. Guha (1944) concluded that the Muslims of Bengal were akin to low caste Hindus. A systematic anthropometric survey was undertaken by D.N. Majumdar and C.R. Rao in the 1950s. In this study, the Muslims of Bengal were divided into fifteen groups. Only one (designated "Muslims of Dacca") of these groups had some of the anthropometric characteristics of high caste groups of Bengal. Nine Muslim groups had, identical mean values as two low-caste groups. Five Muslim groups closely resembled the tribal groups of Bengal. The report concluded that the possible origin of Muslim population in Bengal may be traced to scheduled caste non-Muslim groups of Bengal, and not to high caste groups (1960, p. 17).

The findings of Risley with respect to racial origins of the Muslims of Bengal are also supported by serological surveys. Blood groups as indices of relationship are considered superior to anthropometric measurements because serological differences in the blood cells are determined by heredity and not affected by environment. The serological data collected by D.N. Majumdar suggest that the Muslim population of Bengal are racially different from the Muslims outside India and also from their coreligionists in the Uttar Pradesh. According to Majumder (1960), the blood groups of the Muslims of Bengal are similar to non-caste Hindus and the Mahisayas of Bengal. The anthropometric surveys cited above clearly indicate that the majority of the Muslims of Bengal are likely to be the descendants of local converts.

Though anthropometric evidence suggests that the majority of the Muslims were racially akin to low-caste Hindus, it is not possible to reject the indisputable evidence that a number of Muslim immigrants settled in Bengal. Some Muslims in Bengal originated from an admixture of local and immigrant population. The real issue in

the debate is the proportion of immigrants in the Muslim population in Bengal. In 1901 A.A. Ghuznavi hazarded the following guess, "I think that it will not be unsafe to conclude that roughly speaking 20% of the present Mohammedans are lineal descendants of foreign settlers, that 50% of them have an admixture of foreign blood and the remaining 30% are probably descended from Hindu and other converts" (Quoted in Ali 1985, Vol. IB, p. 788). On the basis of available data on Muslim groups in the census report of 1901, Gait concluded that the foreign elements among the Mohammadans of Bengal "cannot exceed one-sixth of the total number of persons who profess the faith of Islam" (1901, p. 125). Ali is of the opinion that the number of immigrant Muslims in Bengal is "considerably higher than the local converts" (1985, Vol. IB, p. 787). The most ambitious attempt to determine the proportion of immigrants in Muslim population of Bengal was made by Rahim (1963). In his opinion, the Muslim population of Bengal in 1570 stood at 2.7 million of which 1.9 million were local and 0.8 million were immigrants. According to Rahim's estimate, the total Muslim population of Bengal in 1770 was 10.6 million of which 3.27 million belonged to the stock of immigrant Muslims.

Rahim's estimates are based on two simple assumptions. First, on the basis of historical records on Muslim immigrants, Rahim made some guesses about Muslim immigration to Bengal. He estimated that between 1220 and 1756 A.D., 3,37,000 Muslim soldiers came to Bengal. He assumed that no return migration took place. This assumption is unrealistic (Karim 1985, p. 195). During the Muslim rule, Bengal was infamous for its unhealthy climate. Furthermore, the immigrant Muslims had a liking for the cities. It is unlikely that all members of the invading armies settled in rural Bengal. His estimates of Muslim immigrants are, therefore, likely to be biased upwards.

Secondly, on the basis of census data since 1872 which indicated that Muslim population in Bengal increased at a faster rate than Hindu population, he assumed that the Muslim population in Bengal doubled in every one hundred years and the Hindu population increased at the rate of 60 percent in a century.

There are two major shortcomings of Rahim's estimate. First, Rahim suggests that 3,37,000 Muslim soldiers who arrived in Bengal during the period 1220 to 1756 AD swelled to 32,71,500 owing to higher fertility rate among the Muslims. If his logic is correct, the

Muslims should also have constituted a majority in other areas of South Asia such as Delhi and Agra where the bulk of Muslim immigrants settled.

As Table 8 indicates, growth rate for the Muslims of South Asia as a whole was 1.06 percent per annum during the period 1881-1941 whereas the Muslims in Bengal grew at a rate of 1.01 percent. This suggests that immigrant Muslim population in other parts of South Asia grew at a rate faster than that in Bengal. Nevertheless the Muslims remained an insignificant minority around the centres of Muslim political power in North and South India. This clearly indicates that Rahim's assumption about the growth rate of immigrant Muslims in Bengal is highly exaggerated.

Secondly, Rahim assumed that the Muslim population in Bengal grew at the rate of 1 percent and Hindus at the rate of 0.6 percent per annum during the period 1570 to 1870. This assumption is inconsistent with stylized facts of demography. According to the theory of demographic transition, population in pre-industrial societies was stationary because high birth rates in such societies was counterbalanced by high death rates. There were ups and downs in the population, but there was no consistent upward trend. The usual course was a gradual growth for a short-period followed by an abrupt decline. It is, therefore, likely that both Hindu and Muslim populations were stationary in the pre-British Bengal. Rahim's estimate of growth of Muslim population is highly exaggerated. The percentage of immigrants in total Muslim population is likely to be below 10 percent.

The foregoing analysis clearly indicates that most of the Muslims in Bengal are of local origin. It is, however, difficult to explain why local Hindus were attracted to Islam. Nowhere is the resistance to an alien religion so stubborn as in South Asia. Paradoxically, the Hindus of South Asia who accepted so easily political domination of alien Muslim rulers zealously guarded against any intrusion in the religious sphere. Will Durant attributes the primacy of religion in India to the doctrine of transmigration. As Durant observes, "If the Hindus have permitted alien governments to be set over them again and again, it is partly because they did not care much who ruled or exploited them —natives or foreigners, the crucial matter was religion, not politics, the soul and not the body, endless later lives than the passing one" (1963, p. 503). On the face of it, Bengal is virtually indistinguish able from the rest of the subcontinent. There is, therefore, no obvious explanation for Islam's relative success here. Historians

Table 8. A Comparison of population growth by community in Bengal and India, 1891-1941

Community	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	Growth rate between 1881-1941 (Percent per year)
Hindus in India	187.84	207.56	206.86	217.19	216.24	238.64	270.18	0.60
No.(in million)								
% of total population	75.09	74.24	72.87	71.68	70.73	70.67	69.46	–
Hindus in Bengal	17.25	18.06	19.81	20.57	20.41	21.79	25.31	0.63
No.(in million)								
% of total population	48.40	47.20	47.00	45.23	43.72	43.48	41.98	–
Muslims in India	49.95	57.06	62.11	67.83	71.00	79.30	94.44	1.06
No.(in million)								
% of total population	19.97	20.41	21.88	22.39	23.23	23.49	24.28	–
Muslims in Bengal	17.86	19.58	21.57	23.81	25.00	27.28	32.74	1.01
No.(in million)								
% of total population	50.16	51.15	51.19	52.34	53.55	54.44	54.30	
Other Communities in India	12.34	14.94	14.88	17.97	18.47	19.74	24.36	0.78
No.(in million)								
% of total population	4.94	5.35	5.25	5.93	6.04	5.84	6.26	
Other Communities in Bengal	0.49	0.62	0.76	1.10	1.27	1.04	2.24	0.73
No.(in million)								
% of total population	1.44	1.55	1.81	2.43	2.73	2.08	3.72	–
Total population in India	250.15	279.57	283.86	303.00	305.72	337.67	388.99	0.73
No.(in million)								
Total population in Bengal	35.60	38.27	42.14	45.49	46.70	50.11	60.30	0.78
No.(in million)								

Sources : 1. Kingsley Davis, The Population of India and Pakistan (New York: Russel and Russell, 1968) p.179.
2. R.A. Dutch, Census of India, 1941, Vol. IV (Delhi: Manager Publications, 1941), p.48-49.

Note : The data on Bengal refer to the British territory only and exclude Bengal States.

differ as to why the people of Bengal were attracted to Islam more than their compatriots in other regions of India. In the existing literature, four types of hypotheses on Muslim preponderance in Bengal can be identified:

— Intervention of Muslim rulers.
— Reaction of the low caste Hindus against Brahmanical oppression.
— Reaction of the Buddhists against Hindu oppression.
— Missionary activities of the Muslim saints (*Pirs*).

Two arguments may be advanced in favour of the hypothesis that royal patronage was a crucial variable in the spread of Islam in Bengal. First, though there are sporadic instances of conversion to Islam in the pre-Muslim period, there was no significant proselytization to Islam before the establishment of the Muslim rule in Bengal. It is, therefore, inferred that the Muslim rulers in Bengal actively encouraged conversion. This hypothesis is supported by the accounts of the Portuguese merchant Barbosa who noted that the Hindus in the sixteenth century Bengal turned into Muslims "to obtain favour of the King and the governors". (Mukhopadhaya 1980, p. 346). Secondly, some historians argue that "the use of force in some form or other has always been recognized by the Muslim rulers of India and by the orthodox lawyers of Islam, as a proper and lawful method of propagating the faith of the prophet" (Titus 1959, p. 3). It is, therefore, presumed that the Muslim rulers in Bengal also pursued the "fire and sword" policy to convert the infidel subjects in Bengal. For example, Beverley points out, "The Mohammadans were ever ready to make conquests with the Koran as with the sword. Under Sultan Jalaluddin (Jadu) for instance, it is said that the Hindus were persecuted almost to extermination" (1872, p. 132). Obviously, the presence of Muslim rule in Bengal facilitated the spread of Islam. However, it is doubtful whether it played any active role in the process. Islam came to Bengal six hundred years after its advent when the fiery zeal of the faithful for proselytization had already been mellowed by mundane political considerations. This is evident from the interpretations in South Asia of the classical tenets of Islam regarding the obligations of Muslim rulers to convert the infidels. Like Trotskyism, the classical canon law of Islam prescribes that it is incumbent on a Muslim ruler to wage *jihad* (holy war) until the whole world is brought under the sway of Islam. The world is

divided into two camps: *darul Islam* (abode of Islam) and *darul harb* (abode of war). The Muslim rulers are enjoined by the canon law to transform *darul harb* to *darul Islam*. *Jihad* can be postponed only if the infidels submit to Muslim rule, become *dhimmis* and pay the *Jijya* and *Kharaz*. Such accommodation with the infidels is not, however, permitted in all cases. According to classical authorities, the status of *dhimmis* can be extended to only those people who have a scripture recognized by Islam *(Ahlul Kitab)*. Strictly speaking, this relaxation is not applicable to Hindus whose scriptures are not recognized by the Islamic law. For the idolaters like the Hindus, the choice is either to accept Islam or to die. A controversy arose in the eighth century A.D., when the Muslims invaded Sind, as to whether peaceful coexistence of Hinduism in a Muslim state was legal. It was ultimately decided that the Hindus could be allowed to pursue their own religion and to enjoy all the privileges of subjects if they submit to Muslim rule and pay *jijya* and other taxes (Titus 1959). Thus the classical injunction for proselytization was significantly diluted long before Islam came to Bengal.

The distribution of Muslims in different regions of South Asia clearly contradicts the hypothesis that the Muslim political power was the most crucial variable in the spread of Islam. If this hypothesis was correct, there would have been Muslim preponderance in areas around the seats of Muslim rule. The fact that the Muslims remained an insignificant minority in Delhi region where the Muslims ruled for more than six hundred years clearly suggests that Islam in South Asia was not imposed from above. In Bengal also, the share of the Muslims in total population was higher in areas remote from the seats of Muslim power. Thus Bogra and Noakhali districts had proportionately more Muslims than Malda, Dacca and Murshidabad districts where the capitals of Muslim rulers were located (See Table 9).

The coercive power of the Muslim rulers over Hindus in Bengal was limited for two reasons. First, many Muslim rulers in Bengal rebelled against the central rule in Delhi. They had to seek the support of local population for their political survival. For example, Sultan Ilyas Shah (1339-1358 A.D.) had to enlist local Hindus in his army to fight against Firuz Shah Tughluq. He also appointed Shahdeo, a Hindu, a general in his army. Kans, a Hindu courtier, successfully staged a *coup de etat* against the Muslim rule in the fifteenth century Bengal. These indicate that the Hindu civil servants and military leaders continued to be powerful in Muslim Bengal. Secondly, the

Hindus exercised considerable power in local administration during the Muslim rule in Bengal. Even three hundred years after the establishment of Muslim rule, powerful Hindu landlords like Pratapaditya of Jessore, Kandarpa Narayan of Barisal, Lakshman Manikya of Noakhali, Kedar Rai of Vikrampur, Madhu Rai of Pabna, Binod Rai of Manikganj and Ram Chandra of Barisal dominated the rural areas of Bengal.

Table 9. Distribution of population by religion in Bengal by district, 1881

Area/district	Percentage of Muslims in total population	Percentage of Hindus in total population	Percentage of other religionists (including Buddhists, Christians, tribals and other)
Burdwan	18.9	80.5	0.6
Birbhum	20.5	77.7	1.8
Bankura	4.4	87.4	8.2
Midnapur	6.5	88.8	4.7
Hoogly	19.4	80.5	0.1
Hawrah	19.5	80.1	0.4
24 Parganas	37.3	62.0	0.7
Calcutta	31.8	62.6	5.6
Nadia	55.7	42.8	1.5
Murshidabad	48.1	51.7	0.2
Jessore	60.3	39.6	0.1
Khulna	51.4	48.4	0.2
Rajshahi	78.4	21.5	0.1
Dinajpur	52.5	47.3	0.2
Jalpaiguri	35.8	63.2	1.0
Darjeeling	5.3	81.7	13.2
Rangpur	60.9	38.9	0.2
Bogra	80.8	19.1	0
Pabna	72.4	27.5	0.4
Malda	46.3	53.3	0.4
Cooch Bihar State	28.9	70.9	0.2
Dacca	59.1	40.4	0.5
Mymensingh	66.8	32.3	0.9
Faridpur	59.7	40.1	0.2

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Area/district	Percentage of Muslims in total population	Percentage of Hindus in total population	Percentage of other religionists (including Buddhists, Christians, tribals and other)
Bakerganj	66.6	32.8	0.6
Tippera	66.3	33.6	0.1
Noakhali	74.1	25.7	0.2
Chittagong	70.8	24.3	4.9
Chittagong Hill Tracts	7.1	19.9	73.2
Tripura State	28.1	10.2	61.7
Bengal	49.6	48.8	1.6

Source : Census of India, 1931, Vol. V, Part-I, p.411.

Politically, Hindu-Muslim rapprochement was highly desirable for the Muslim rulers in Bengal. The Muslim rulers therefore, consciously courted the Hindus. While the caste Hindus discouraged the translation of their scriptures into Bengali, it is the Muslim rulers who patronized the translation of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata*. The Ramayana was translated by Kirtibasa in the fifteenth century under the patronage of either Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah (1415-1434 A.D.) or Ruknuddin Barbak Shah (1459-1474 A.D.). Translations of the *Mahabharata* were commissioned separately by Sultan Nusrat Shah (1520-1538 A.D.) and a Muslim feudal lord. Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah (1474-1481 A.D.) engaged Maladhar Basu to render *Bhagavata* into Bengali. The same author also wrote *Srikrishna Vijaya*. Sultan Jalaluddin, who is alleged to have persecuted the Hindus, was the patron of Hindu religious scholar Brihaspati.

Though the Portuguese merchant Barbosa suspected that the Hindus became Muslims in the sixteenth century to get royal favour, instances of such royal gifts to local Muslim converts are extremely rare. On the contrary, historical records suggest that the Mughal rulers in Bengal were altogether indifferent to Islamic missionary efforts. Mirza Nathan reported that on one occasion Mughal governor Islam Khan (17th century) punished his officers for converting Hindus to Islam. Manrique, the Augustinian missionary who visited Dhaka in 1640, mentioned that the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan refused to prosecute the Christian missionaries despite the complaints

of the mullahs that the Christian were defying Islamic law by eating pork and drinking wine. In fact the Hindus benefited much more than the converted Muslims from the Muslim rule in Bengal. In Muslim Bengal, the political and military offices were monopolised by the immigrants from West Asia whereas the revenue offices were held by the Hindus. Specially, the Kayasthas—a Hindu subcaste, rose to a position of great importance in the society during the Muslim rule. The Kayasthas were preferred for revenue work because they were experienced and submissive. The Muslim rulers did not want to cause any dislocation in their revenue administration simply for patronising local converts. Consequently, Hindu revenue functionaries exploited locally converted Muslim peasants during the Muslim rule. This clearly suggests that there was no systematic policy of encouraging conversion to Islam. In the caste-dominated society of Bengal local Muslim converts continued in their old professions even after their conversions. The descriptions of the sixteenth century poet Mukundaram suggest that the Muslims in Bengal were engaged in such humdrum and lowly occupations as milkman (Goala), weaver (Jolha), cowherd (Mukeri), baker (Pitari), fish seller (Kabari), beggar (Kal), loom-maker (Rang-rez), tailors (darzi), butcher (Kasai), hazzam (those who perform circumcision) and qalandar (wandering darvishes). (Karim 1985, pp. 204-205). Conversion to Islam did not, therefore, entail any significant economic benefit in medieval Bengal.

The second hypothesis postulates that the spread of Islam in Bengal was a natural reaction of the low caste Hindus against the oppressions of Brahmins. It is presumed that the exclusive caste system of the Hindus had reduced the "semi-amphibious aborigines of Bengal into "merely the hewers of wood and drawers of water for a set of masters in whose eyes they were unclean beasts and altogether abominable" (Beverley 1872). It is, therefore, suggested that low caste Hindus naturally accepted Islam which "brought the Gospel of the Unity of God and the equality of men in its sight to a despised and wretched population" (Arnold 1913).

This hypothesis is criticized from two opposing points of view. First, it is argued that the perception of exploitation by the high caste Hindus did not at all exist in the medieval times. The dominance of high caste Hindus over low castes was viewed in pre-modern times not as exploitation but as a part of the natural order. The notion of bitter resentment against dominance of high caste Hindus is a product

of the Enlightenment in Europe. This hypothesis, therefore amounts to what Eaton describes as "reading history backward" (1994, p. 117). Secondly, it has been observed that even if the perception of upper caste exploitation existed in other parts of South Asia, it did not exist in Bengal. The hold of the Brahmins over society in Bengal was too tenuous to be exploitative. Many Brahmins in Bengal were themselves considered impure and polluted. According to legends, Adisura had to import five Brahmins from Kanauj to maintain the purity of the Brahmins (Majumder 1377 B.S., pp. 194-195). The genealogical literature also reports that present Brahmins were imported from outside Bengal by Sena King Vallala Sena and Varman King Shyamal Varma. According to Holayudh (12th century), the Brahmins in Bengal were not well-trained in vedic rituals. Local Brahmins in Bengal were mainly divided into two categories: *Srotriya Brahmana* and *Varna Brahmana*. The *Srotriya* Brahmins used to consider *Varna* Brahmins as untouchables and did not take water from their hands. There are different gradations among varna Brahmans themselves. The *Vyasokta* Brahmans who serve the Chashi Kaivarta caste rank so low that even their own clients do not touch food in their house. The *Agradani* Brahmans who preside at funeral ceremonies and take the offerings of the dead are considered polluted. The *graha—vipras* or *Acharyas* who acted as fortune—tellers, palmists and makers of horoscope were looked down upon as impure. The *bhat* Brahmans who used to earn their living by eulogising the rich were the offspring of mixed marriages and were treated as disgraced *(patita)*. According to Risley, the varna Brahmins in Bengal were not Aryans and many of these Brahmins were "manufactured on the spot by the simple process of conferring the title of Brahman on the tribal priests of the local deities" (Risley 1915, p. 33). Many Brahmins in Bengal were themselves oppressed like the low castes. It is, therefore, difficult to accept the theory that the oppressions of Brahmins in Bengal drove the low caste Hindus to Islam.

The hypothesis of low caste conversion also exaggerates egalitarianism of Islam in medieval Bengal. Theoretically, all followers of Islam are equal in the sight of God and of His prophet. In Bengal, however, the Muslims themselves were contaminated by the Hindu caste system. There were two main social divisions among the Muslims of Bengal: "Ashraf" and "Ajlaf" which in Bengali has been corrupted to "Atrap". It is interesting to note that the converts from

higher caste Hindus in Bengal were equated with undoubted descendants of foreigners and treated as "Ashraf" or noble. "All other Muhammadans including the functional groups... and all converts of lower rank are collectively known by the contemptuous term, "Ajlaf" "wretches" or "mean people", they are also called as "Kamina" or "Itar" "base" or Razel, a corruption of Rizal, worthless" (Gait 1901, p. 439). Lower caste Hindus who embraced Islam did not, therefore, automatically join an egalitarian brotherhood. Neither their economic conditions nor their social status changed significantly because of conversion. In fact the converts from the lowest castes were often discriminated against in Muslim Bengal. As Gait points out, "In some places a third class called Arzal or "lowest of all" is added. It consists of the very lowest classes such as the Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Abdal and Bediya with whom no other Mohammadan would associate and who were forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground" (Gait 1901). Because of these discriminations, the lowest caste Hindus were likely to be put off by the actual practices of the Muslims.

Finally, the oppression of the Brahmins is not in the least unique to Bengal. As the South Asian proverbs indicate, the Brahmins are equally hated throughout the subcontinent. The Brahmins are described as "a priest by appearance but a butcher at heart". The following proverb illustrates the hatred against the Brahmins: "Is Duniya men tin Kasai/Pishu, Khatmal, Brahman Bhai" (blood suckers three on earth there be/the bug, the Brahman and the flea) (Risley 1915, p.131). In fact, Bengal did not experience the worst kinds of Brahmanical oppressions. Such oppressions are more stark in other parts of South Asia. For example, in Madras a pariah is said to pollute a high-caste Hindu by approaching within a distance of sixty-four feet. In some areas of South India the Sudras are required to "leave the road when they saw a Brahman coming or to announce their approach by a special cry like the lepers of Europe in the Middle Ages" (Risley 1915). Similar inequities did not exist in Bengal. If Islam's egalitarianism vis-a-vis the Brahmanical oppression of the low caste Hindus was the main attraction for conversion to Islam, the expansion of Islam would have been more spectacular in other parts of the sub-continent.

A number of historians attribute the preponderance of Muslims in Bengal to mass conversion of the Buddhists to Islam in protest against the oppressions of the Hindu rulers. As Titus observed with

reference to eastern Bengal, "The inhabitants were under the influence of a crude form of Buddhism and despised as they were by their proud Aryan rulers who held them in disdain, they apparently welcomed the Muslim missionaries gladly" (1959, p. 45). According to another historian, "bad blood between Hindus and Buddhists might conceivably have favoured conversion to Islam" (Mitra 1954, p. 82).

There is, however, no direct historical evidence of conversion of Buddhists to Islam. There is indirect evidence of the oppression of Buddhists by the Hindus. Taranath reports that persecuted Buddhist monks acted as the spies of the Muslim invaders of Bengal (Roy 1400 B.S., p. 414). The Sena Kings were hostile to Buddhism. In *Dana Sagara* which is attributed to Vallala Sena (1160-1178 A.D.) the king was portrayed as the destroyer of the *nastiks* (atheists, implying Buddhists) in the kali age (Roy 1983, p. 34). Ramai Pundit describes how the Buddhists sought the help of God Dharma to protect them against the oppressions of the Brahmins.

It is not unlikely that some Buddhists in Bengal accepted Islam. However, these sporadic conversions cannot at all account for the preponderance of Muslims in Bengal for three reasons. First, the Buddhists themselves did not constitute the majority of the population in Bengal on the eve of the Muslim conquest. According to Nihar Ranjan Roy, the Hindus by far outnumbered the Buddhists even during the Pala rule (756-1143 A.D.) when the Buddhist kings ruled Bengal (Roy 1400 B.S., p. 508). According to another historian, on the eve of the Muslim conquest, the three main religious groups in the land in order of numerical strength were the Hindus, Buddhists and Jains (Ali 1985, Vol. I, p. 732). The conversion of Buddhists alone cannot, therefore, explain Muslim preponderance in Bengal.

Secondly, if the hypothesis that the Buddhists accepted Islam *en masse* owing to oppressions of the Hindus is correct, the conversion of the Buddhists would have taken place immediately after the establishment of Muslim rule in the thirteenth century. The accounts of Ibn Batuta clearly show that no such mass conversions to Islam took place in eastern Bengal even in the middle of the fourteenth century. While returning from Sylhet after meeting with the saint Shah Jalal, Ibn Batuta travelled down the Meghna river for fifteen days and described the people of Eastern Bengal as "infidels under Muslim rule" (1969, p. 267). This clearly indicates that mass conversion of Buddhists cannot explain for Muslim preponderance in the eastern Bengal.

Finally, the conflicts between the Hindus and Buddhists have been exaggerated. On the contrary, there are many instances of harmony and understanding between the Hindus and Buddhists. The Pala kings who were themselves Buddhists married Brahmin princesses and patronized Hindu temples. The Hindu Gods were worshipped in the Buddhist vihars. On the other hand, the Buddha himself was apotheosized by Hinduism and Hindu icons were influenced by the images of the Buddha. At the folk level Hinduism and Buddhism came very close to each other (Roy 1400 B.S., pp. 557-560). It is, therefore, very unlikely that the Buddhists will embrace Islam which did not at all recognize the Buddha as a prophet to escape from Hinduism which worshipped the Buddha as a God. The Muslims in South Asia were much less tolerant of Buddhism. As Will Durant observes, "When the Arabs came, pledged to spread a simple and stoic monotheism, they looked with scorn upon the lazy, venal, miracle-mongering Buddhist monks; they smashed the monasteries, killed thousands of monks and made monasticism unpopular with the cautious" (1963, p.505). The accounts of the chronicler Minhas-i-Siraj indicate that Ikhtiyar-al-din Muhammed bin Bakhtiyar Khalji, the first Muslim conqueror of Bengal put to death shaven—headed Buddhist monks in Udantapuri vihara and destroyed the monastery's library (Majumdar 1958, pp. 50-51). The theory of *en masse* conversion of the Buddhists in Bengal to Islam does not, therefore, appear to be plausible.

The fourth hypothesis suggests that intensive missionary activities undertaken by the Sufi saints, contributed to Muslim preponderance in Bengal. "God be praised", wrote Mir Saiyid Ashraf Jahangir Simnani, a celebrated saint of Jaunpur in the 14th century, "what a good land is that of Bengal, where numerous saints and ascetics came from different direction and made it their habitation and home" (Rahim 1963, p. 123). Most saints who preached Islam are honoured in shrines set up by their devotees. A shrine is either a tomb or a memorial.

Table 10 presents an analysis of the distribution of the major shrines of Muslims saints (Pirs) in Bengal. The mythical saints whose shrines could not be clearly identified (such as Panch Pir, Bara Aulia etc.) were excluded. Obviously the data on the saints in the historical records are scanty. As a result, all the data in Table 10 may not be accurate. In spite of these limitations of data, Table 10 indicates two interesting trends. Of the 59 historical saints mentioned

in Table 10, three saints are reported to have preached Islam long before the Muslim conquest of Bengal in the thirteenth century. Out of 56 historical saints who came to Bengal during the Muslim rule (1206-1757 A.D.) 15 percent arrived in the thirteenth century, 36 percent in the fourteenth century, 18 percent in the fifteenth century, 23 percent in the 16th century and 3 percent in the 17th and 18th centuries. This clearly indicates that intensive missionary activities of Muslim saints in Bengal lasted for about four centuries—from the thirteenth to sixteenth century. The Muslim missionary activities started in the 13th century, peaked in the 14th century, declined in the 15th century and again surged in the 16th century. This suggests that conversion to Islam in Bengal was not sudden; the gradual process of conversion continued over a long time.

Secondly, Table 10 suggests that saints carried the message of Islam to all parts of Bengal and their shrines are scattered throughout the country. However, there are certain areas which were more favoured by the saints. The historical saints showed a marked preference for Dacca, Maldah, Hugli and Burdwan districts. This may be attributed to the fact that they wanted to remain near the seats of Muslim rule.

Table. 10. Distribution of major shrines of Muslim saints in Bengal

Area	Approximate Time	Type	Name of the Saint	Location of the Shrine
Chittagong	9th Century	Mythical	Bayazid Bustami	Chittagong
	13th century	Mythical	Shaikh Farid	Chittagong
	13th century	Historical	Shaikh Bakhtiar Mysore	Sandwip
	16th century	Historical	Shaikh Jalal Halwi	Hathazari
Noakhali	13th century	Historical	Syed Miran Shah	Kanchanpur
Comilla	14th century	Historical	Hadrat Rasti Shah	Meher in Chandpur
	14/15th century	Historical	Syed Ahmed Kella Shahid	Kharampur in Brahmanbaria
	14th century	Historical	Shah Kamal	Utkhara village
	14th century	Historical	Shah Muhammad Bagdadi	Shahtali in Chandpur
Sylhet	14th century	Historical	Shah Jalal	Sylhet

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Area	Approximate Time	Type	Name of the Saint	Location of the Shrine
Mymensingh	11th century	Historical	Shah Mohamad Sultan Rumi	Madanpur in Netrokona
	14th century	Historical	Shah Kamal	Garo Hills
	Late 15th early 16th century	Historical	Shah Adam	Atiya
Dacca	13th century	Historical	Shaikh Shraf al Din Abu Tawwamah	Sonargaon
	Date not known	Historical	Shah Niamatullah	Purana Paltan in Dhaka
	Late 13th/early 14th century	Historical	Shaikh Anwar	Sonargaon
	14th century	Historical	Baba Adam Shahid	Vikrampur in Munshiganj
	14th century	Historical	Syed Ali Tabrizi	Dhamrai
	14th century	Historical	Shah Malek Yamani	Dacca City
	15th century	Historical	Shah Langar	Ten miles North of Dacca
	Late 15th/early 16th century	Historical	Shah Mannan	Mongrapra in Sonargaon
	Early 16th century	Historical	Haji Baba Saleh	Bandar in Narayanganj
	Late 15th/early 16th century	Historical	Khawaja Chisti Behesti	Dacca
	16th century	Historical	Shah Ali Bagdadi	Mirpur
Bakerganj	14th/15th century	Historical	Syedul Arefin	Baufal in Bakerganj
Khulna	15th century	Historical	Khan Jahan Ali	Bagerhat
Jessore	16th century	Historical	Khalas Khan	Ved Kashi
Rajshahi	15th/16th century	Historical	Makhdum Jalal uddin Rupos	Rajshahi town
	16th century	Historical	Maulana Sha Daula (Shah Muazzam Danish Mand)	Bagha
Pabna	13th century	Historical	Makhdum Shah	Shahjadpur
	Before 16th century	Historical	Shah Sharif Zindani	Tarash

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Area	Approximate Time	Type	Name of the Saint	Location of the Shrine
Bogra	11th century A.D.	Historical	Mir Syed Sultan Mahmud Mahisawar	Mahasthangarh
	No date	Mythical	Shah Turkan Shahid	Sherpur
	No date	Mythical	Baba Adam	Adamdighi
Rangpur	Date not known	Mythical	Shah Kalandar	Domar
	15th century	Historical	Shaikh Ismail Ghazi	Kant Duar
Dinajpur	Date not known	Mythical	Nasiruddin Shah Nek mard	Nek mardan
	14th century	Historical	Maulana Ata	Gangarampur
	Late 15th/early 16th century	Historical	Shaikh Badruddin	Hemtabad
Maldah	13th century	Historical	Shaikh Jalal al Din Tabrizi	Deotala
	Late 13th/early 14th century	Historical	Shaikh Jamal	Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Shaikh Akhi Seraj Al Din Uthman	Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Shaikh Al Haq	Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Shaikh Raja Biyabani	Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Hadrat Nur Qutb Alam	Pandua
	15th century	Historical	Maulana Barkhurdar	Gauda
	17th century	Historical	Shah Niamatullah	Gauda
24 Parganas	14th century	Historical	Syed Abbas Ali Makki (Pir Gora Chand)	Harna Village in Bashirhat
	14th century	Historical	Rowshan Ara	Kathulia in Bashirhat
	15th century	Historical	Ekdil Shah	Barasat
	No date	Mythical	Mobarak Ghazi	—
Calcutta	No date	Mythical	Sharif Shah	Calcutta

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Area	Approximate Time	Type	Name of the Saint	Location of the Shrine
Hugli	13th century	Historical	Shah Sufi Shahid	Satgaon
	Late 13th/early 14th century	Historical	Shah Safial Din	Chota Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Shah Anwar Quli Halwi	Phurphura
	14th century	Mythical	Bara Khan Ghazi	Tribeni in Hugli
Midnapur	13/14th century	Historical	Amir Khan Lohani	Indas Village
Burdwan	13th century	Historical	Makhdum Shah	Mangalkot
	15th/16th century	Historical	Shah Sultan Ansari	Mangalkot
	16th century	Historical	Bahram Sakka	Burdwan
	16th century	Historical	Makhdum Shah Abdullah Gujrati	Mangalkot
	17th/18th century	Historical	Khawaja Anwar Shah	Burdwan
Birbhum	13th century	Historical	Shaikh Abdullah Kirmani	Khustigiri
	16th century	Historical	Makhdum Shah Zahir al Din	Makdhum
Adjoining	13/14th century	Historical	Shaikh Al Din	Bihar
Bihar			Maneri	
District	15th century	Historical	Shaikh Husain Dukarposh	Bihar
	Late 14th/15th century	Historical	Shah Badrul Islam	Bihar
	Late 14th/15th century	Historical	Shah Majlis	Bihar

Sources: 1. *Muhammad Abdur Rahim, Social and Cultural History of Bengal* Vol. I. (Karachi: Pakistan: Historical Society, 1963), pp. 72-150.

2. Chowdhury Shamsur Rahman, *Purba Pakistane Islamer Alo* (Dacca: Pakistan Publications, 1965), pp. 33-96.

The Muslim saints are not, however, unique to Bengal. The other regions of the subcontinent were also equally blessed by the activities of the saints. H.A. Rose lists 113 major shrines of Muslim saints who preached Islam in the Punjab and North West Frontier Province

(n.d., pp. 48-84). Prominent among the saints in those areas were Khawaja Muinuddin Chisti (13th century) in Ajmer, Bu Ali Qalandar in Panipat (14th century). Data Ganj Baksh (11th century) in Lahore, Shah Fariduddin in the Punjab, Bulbul Shah and Syed Ali Hammadani in Kashmir and Qutbuddin and Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi. In the Deccan, Islam was preached by Sayyed Muhammad Gisu Daraz and Pir Mahabir Kamdyat (14th century). In Gujrat, the missionary activities were carried on by Iman Shah of Pirana and Dawal Shah Pir in the fifteenth century. In Sind and the Cutch, Sayyid Yusufuddin and Pir Sadaruddin (15th century) became famous for their missionary activities.

Historical records clearly suggest that conversions to Islam in South Asia occurred primarily through the efforts of Muslim saints. However, the degree of success of these saints varied from region to region. A question, therefore, arises why the Muslim saints attained significant success in Bengal though proselytization efforts of their counterparts failed in much of South Asia. In spiritual accomplishment, the Pirs in other parts of South Asia were not in any way inferior to the Pirs in Bengal. The inescapable conclusion is that the Pirs in Bengal succeeded not because they were more powerful, persistent or efficient but because they worked in an environment which was much more conducive to proselytization.

Of late, historians have realised that it is not sufficient to establish that Islam was propagated in Bengal by the Muslim saints (Pirs). It is also necessary to explain why Pirs in Bengal succeeded in attracting so many converts whereas the messages of their counterparts in much of South Asia fell on deaf ears. Consequently, attempts have been made to explain the uniqueness of pirs in Bengal. According to one hypothesis, Pirism or the cult of pir in Bengal was a unique brand of spiritualism that specifically catered to the needs of the people in the deltaic areas. The second hypothesis posits that pirs in Bengal were an unique blend of spiritualism and entrepreneurship that made them "charismatic pioneers in the agrarian frontier".

Asim Roy, the proponent of the first hypothesis, attributes the relative success of Islam in Bengal to the institution of "Pirism". The term pir literally implies "a spiritual director or guide". The institution of pir is not at all unique to Bengal. Roy, however, suggests that pirs in Bengal were different from their counterparts in the rest of South Asia. In his opinion, there are three distinct features of pirs in Bengal. First, the term pir in Bengal has a very wide connotation.

It covers not only mystic guides, saints and holy men but also apotheosized soldiers, pioneering settlers in the wastelands, metamorphosed Hindu and Buddhist divinities and anthopomorphized animistic spirits and beliefs. Pirs were venerated for their supernatural and thaumaturgic powers. Secondly, the institution of pir in Bengal was subjected to a process of folk religious transmutation. This gave pirism in Bengal its distinctiveness and context. The deified animistic spirits like the tiger god, the serpent goddess and crocodile goddess were integrated into the institution of pir in Bengal. Finally, the pirs became the binding forces in the highly unstable society in Bengal. As Roy puts it, "The ferocity of nature and anarchical conditions in the active delta, aggravated by the conditions of institutional inadequacies in social and cultural terms focussed on the dire need of some binding forces of authority, stability and assurance in largely unstable physical and social situation" (1983, p. 50). The underprivileged in Bengal needed the spiritual support of the Pirs to face the trials and tribulations of their everyday life. He suggests that these mass conversions of socially underprivileged groups in Lower Bengal to Islam took place because Pirism catered to their spiritual needs. He argues that "isolated and individual conversions cannot, however, offer adequate explanation for the great preponderance of Muslims in Bengal, particularly in the rural areas" (1983, p. 42). He also maintains that the initial conversion of the Bengali masses did not result in spiritual illumination and change of inner religious consciousness and experience. They were "converted in the social sense of moving out of one community to another "or a" shifting of camps" (1983, p. 38).

There are two major weaknesses in Roy's analysis. First, Roy exaggerated the distinctiveness of Pirism in Bengal. The essentials of Pirism are not unknown either to Hinduism in Bengal or to Muslims in other regions of the subcontinent. The ancient *Guru-chela* (master-disciple) relationship and the universal belief in local gods and goddesses are essential ingredients of Hinduism (Titus 1959, p. 137). The practices of Pirism among the Muslims were strikingly similar in different parts of South Asia. Some of the mythical Pirs of Bengal were venerated in the same manner in other regions of the subcontinent. The Panch Pir cult was popular among both the Hindus and Muslims throughout northern India (Rose, n.d.). Similarly Khawaja Khijr who was worshipped in Bengal as Pir Badr was venerated throughout the Muslim world. Ghazi Miyan who is adored

in Bengal as a saint of marriage and fertility is also venerated in the U.P. and the Punjab (Titus, 1959). Some of the mythical Pirs of Bengal are local such as Manai Pir, the patron saint of love, Tinnath, the protector of the cattle, Manik Pir, the guardian saint of village, Ghazi Shaheb, the Protector against tiger and Satya Pir, the protector of life and property. Similar local pirs flourished among the Muslims in other regions of India also. Shakhi Sarwar Sultan is the Punjabi equivalent of Manik Pir in Bengal. Shaikh Saddu was the counterpart of Manai Pir. Among local pirs in other parts of the subcontinent, Gugga Pir Lalbag, Pir Sahtab, Pir Milas, Pir Didar, Kath Bawa Shahib, Pir Imam Zamin etc. deserve special mention. It is not correct to assume that the peasants of Bengal needed Pirs more desperately than other South Asian farmers because the Nature in Bengal was cruel. The Nature was not, however, kinder in other parts of India. The odds of peasant life were similar throughout the whole of the subcontinent. The popularity of the Pirs as protector against the elements of the Nature was not therefore, unique to Bengal.

Secondly, there is no historical evidence on mass conversions to Islam in Bengal. There are, however, instances of mass conversions to Islam in other regions of South Asia. In the Punjab there were often conversions of entire tribes. For example, according to legends and hagiography, Baba Fariduddin of Pak Pattan converted sixteen Punjabi tribes (Titus, 1959, p. 45). There are also instances of conversions of professional groups in the cities (Karim, 1985). Mass conversions often took place when a king or tribal leader accepted Islam. There is no such instance of mass conversions in Bengal. Roy mentioned a number of instances of individual conversion. He however, could not cite a single case of mass conversion in Bengal. As Mohar Ali rightly emphasizes, "It is noteworthy that there is no mention in the sources, literary or otherwise of any large scale conversion at any time or place. Had there been any case of mass conversion of any class of people, high or low, it would have definitely found special mention in the contemporary chronicles or hagiological literature, particularly as the writers of the time were careful to note any point of religious merit for their heroes" (Ali 1985, Vol. 1B, p. 782).

Mass conversions take place when an entire group or the majority members of a group embrace a new faith. Such social aggregations may include a tribe, village community, caste group, or professional group etc. Roy could not specify which type of groups accepted

Islam in Bengal. On the other hand some of the instances of individual conversions clearly illustrate that mass conversions did not at all take place in Bengal. When Jadu became a Muslim, his father or brother did not embrace Islam. It is recorded that a Mech Chief accepted Islam in the hands of Bakhtiyar Khalji. But his followers did not accept Islam (Ali 1985, Vol. IB, p. 782). There is no instance in Bengal of conversion to Islam of an entire village or tribe. Even in eastern Bengal where the Muslims constituted a significant majority, it will be very difficult to find a village which is entirely Muslim. If mass conversion was dominant method of conversion, Hinduism would have been largely wiped out from the predominantly Muslim areas. As table-9 indicates the share of Hindu population was not insignificant even in predominantly Muslim districts.

If Roy's hypothesis of mass conversion is correct, Islam would have spread in Bengal in a short time. There are at least three reasons to infer that conversion to Islam in Bengal was gradual and spanned over at least four hundred years. First, the accounts of foreign travellers in Bengal suggest that conversion to Islam in Bengal was gradual. Ibn Batuta visited Bengal in 1342. He noted that the people in eastern Bengal were infidels. This implies that eastern Bengal was predominantly Hindu even after 150 years of Muslim rule. The Portuguese traveller Barbosa visited Bengal in 1514 A.D. He noted as follows: "The king who is a Moor is a great lord and very rich, he possesses much country inhabited by the Gentiles (Hindus) of whom everyday many turn Moors (Muslims) to obtain the favour of the King and governors" (Quoted in Rahim 1963, p. 67). This observation clearly suggests that conversion to Islam was continuing in the early sixteenth century and the country was predominantly inhabited by the Hindus till the sixteenth century. The inescapable conclusion from these accounts is that conversion to Islam continued at least till the sixteenth century. Secondly, Table 10 clearly indicates that a large number of saints preached Islam in Bengal in the sixteenth century. Had conversion to Islam in the predominantly Muslim districts in eastern Bengal been completed before the sixteenth century, these religious preachers would not have come to areas like Chittagong, Dacca, Mymensingh and Rajshahi.

Finally, the hypothesis of gradual diffusion of Islam in Bengal is supported by the recent historical research on the spread of Islam in the Middle East. According to one estimate, less than 10 percent of the population of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and Spain embraced

Islam within the first century of Muslim rule. It took about four hundred years to convert the majority of local population to Islam in the Middle East countries outside Arabia (Hourani 1992, pp. 46-47).

A second attempt to explain the unique role of the pirs in Bengal was made by Eaton (1994). While Roy underlines the spiritual role of the pirs in an unstable society, Eaton emphasizes the entrepreneurship of the pirs whom he describes as the "charismatic pioneers of the agrarian frontier in Bengal". The main arguments of Eaton may be summarized as follows:

1. The spread of Islam in eastern and southern Bengal coincided with a major ecological change in the late sixteenth century. The main course of the Ganges river shifted from the western Bhagirathi to eastern Padma channel. As a result, the areas located in the western part of Bengal delta experienced gradual decrease in the flow of water and silt. In geographical parlance, these areas degenerated into a moribund delta. This resulted not only in the fall of agricultural productivity but also in recurrence of epidemics which flourished in the stagnant waters of dead rivers. By contrast, the areas in the active delta in eastern Bengal were highly fertile as well as healthy places for habitation.
2. The ecological change contributed to the migration of population from the moribund to the active delta. The newly accreted lands in eastern and southern Bengal were colonized by migrants coming "from the relatively less fertile upper delta or West Bengal or even from north India and beyond" (p. 226).
3. The colonization of the active delta in eastern and southern Bengal required the clearing of thick jungles. In Eaton's words, "superior organizational skills and abundant manpower was necessary for transforming the region's formerly thick jungles into rice fields" (p. 210). The leadership for colonization of the active delta in eastern and southern Bengal came from the pirs.
4. The pirs succeeded in setting up settlements in the active delta that attracted the indigenous communities of fisherman and shifting cultivators in addition to immigrants from outside. They constructed mosques in these new settlements and the mosques "institutionalized the cult of Islam". Because of high productivity of active delta, population in the new settlements

multiplied rapidly. The settlements established by the pirs in the active delta, therefore, contributed to the predominance of the Muslims in eastern and southern Bengal.

The main attraction of Eaton's hypothesis is that it offers a plausible explanation for the unique success of the pirs in Bengal. While the pirs in other parts of India were merely spiritual mentors, the pirs in Bengal combined spiritualism with entrepreneurship. This hypothesis is not, however, corroborated by historical evidence. First, Eaton exaggerated the disruptive effects of the shift in the course of the main channel of the Ganges. Such shifts of river channels in the deltas are not at all unusual. The moribund delta in Bengal was a wetland. The ecology of wetlands through the process of natural succession changes very slowly. Consequently, the harmful effects of the change in the main course of the Ganges became critical not in the sixteenth century but in the nineteenth century (Geddes 1929; Ganguly 1938). There is no causal relationship between the expansion of cultivation in the active delta and the spread of Islam in Bengal in the 16th and 17th centuries. The acceleration in the spread of Islam since the sixteenth century may be simply explained as the culmination of proselytization efforts of previous three hundred years.

Secondly, there is no direct evidence to support Eaton's hypothesis that there was a significant emigration from the moribund delta in west Bengal to active delta in south and east Bengal. He ignores financial and psychological costs of such migration. Because of strong emotional attachment to the ancestral land, Hindu villagers in Bengal had always been very reluctant to migrate. The respect for ancestral land is sanctified by various rites in Hinduism. The colonizers of newly formed lands in the active delta came primarily from within the region and not from outside. It is likely that a large number of people in the active delta were victims of erosion of rivers every year. Such victims are likely to be attracted to newly formed land. The spurt in population growth in the active delta might also have encouraged settlement in newly accreted lands. Had there been significant migration from west Bengal to active delta, the dialects of southern Bengal should have been influenced more by the dialects of west Bengal rather than those of eastern Bengal. The similarity of dialects in the contiguous areas in eastern and southern Bengal do not support the hypothesis of large-scale immigration from outside.

Thirdly, Eaton understates the success of Islamic missionary efforts in the moribund delta. The geographical distribution of Muslim population in the census of 1881 does not indicate very significant difference in the share of Muslims in total population between the active and moribund deltas in Bengal. Jessore, Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda districts are located in the moribund delta. The percentage of Muslim population in these districts in the census of 1881 was as follows: in Jessore 60.36 percent, in Nadia 55.5 percent, in Murshidabad 50.7 percent and in Malda 46.3 percent (see Table 9). In Khulna, which was located in the active delta, the share of Muslim population was only 51.4 percent. On the contrary, in Bogra which was located outside the active delta, the percentage of Muslim population was over 80 percent. It is, therefore, obvious that Muslim preponderance was not confined to newly colonized areas in the active delta.

Finally, he exaggerates the role of the pirs in clearing the jungles in the active delta. The colonization of newly accreted land was a continuous process. It started long before the shifting of the channel of the Ganges as well as the arrival of the Muslim saints and continued till the 20th century. Faridpur inscription of the 6th century refers to *Navyavakasika* which literally implies newly formed lands. The process continued before the arrival of the Muslims. A Chinese traveller to Bengal in 1349-50 noted as follows: "These people owe all their tranquillity and prosperity to themselves, for its source lies in their devotion to agriculture whereby a land originally covered with jungle has been reclaimed by their unremitting toil in tilling and planting" (Quoted in Ali, 1985, Vol. IB, p.932). It is not clear why entrepreneurial pirs were needed since the 16th century whereas the process of colonization continued silently for hundreds of years. Eaton's assumption that pirs attracted to their settlements indigenous shifting cultivators and communities of fisherman appear to be grossly unrealistic. The active delta had a settled agriculture for a long time. The communities of fishermen in Bengal had always been part-time cultivators as well. The accounts of Ibn Batuta who travelled to eastern Bengal clearly show that the area was cultivated by settled farmers. What is more surprising is that Eaton portrays the immigrants from the Middle East as the pioneers of wet rice cultivation in Bengal. For example, he notes, "In Pail several miles from Habiganj stands the shrine of another holy man who is said to have come from the Middle East and taught the local people the techniques

of rice farming and the fundamentals of Islam" (p. 208). Similarly, he reported that Shah Saiyid Nasir Al Din who also immigrated from the Middle East instructed local population in clearing the land and planting rice. It is highly unlikely that the immigrants from the arid Middle East taught local people the art of wet rice cultivation which the indigenous farmers practiced for thousands of years.

An analysis of Eaton's hypothesis clearly indicates that he attempted to generalize the role of the pirs in Bengal on the basis of Khan Jahan Ali's unique experience in Bagerhat area in the fifteenth century. Khan Jahan Ali colonized mangrove forests which required superior organizational skill and large resources. However, similar resources were not at all needed for clearing sal forests and hill forests inside Bengal delta. Khan Jahan Ali was an exception. Except Pir Umar Shah of Noakhali in the 18th century, Eaton could not specifically cite the names of historical pirs who undertook the clearing of mangrove forests in the lower Bengal. He primarily relies on the evidence of folk literature. What Eaton shows is that some pirs were active in clearing the jungles in lower Bengal. This does not imply that the initiative for clearing of the forests came exclusively from the pirs. Both Muslim and Hindu landlords also took initiative in bringing virgin areas of lower Bengal under cultivation. In Khulna district, major colonization efforts took place in the nineteenth century under the aegis of the British rulers. In Bakerganj, extension of cultivation continued till the end of the nineteenth century under both Hindu and Muslim entrepreneurs. There was, therefore, no sudden spurt in colonization activities under the Muslim pirs. Eaton may be right in asserting that some villages in newly cleared areas in eastern Bengal were established by Muslim pirs. This, however, does not prove that the majority of new villages were set up by the pirs. Furthermore, much of eastern Bengal was not an empty land. There were human habitations in this area long before the shifting of the channel of the Ganges. Though every year new settlements came into being, the share of population of new villages in total population is not likely to be high. The Muslim preponderance of eastern and southern Bengal cannot, therefore, be explained by the activities of the entrepreneurial pirs.

An analysis of the distribution of well-known shrines (see Table 10) clearly suggests that the activities of the Muslim Pirs in Bengal were not confined only to the active delta in the east. There were similar

missionary efforts by the pirs in the moribund delta in west Bengal. The degree of the success of the Pirs varied from region to region.

Finally, Eaton fails to answer two vital questions. First, what was the sequence of conversion and colonization? Were immigrants settled in newly cleared lands first and converted later? Or were they converted first and settled later? Was there any lag between conversion and colonization? Secondly, he fails to explain the motivations for conversion. Were local people attracted by economic benefits of new settlements? Or was the spiritual role of the pirs more compelling?

The motivation of religious conversion may be myriad ranging from the grossly materialistic to the most sublime. Broadly speaking, religious conversions may be divided into two categories: conversion from above and conversion from below. The former refers to group conversion, the latter to individual conversion. Conversion from above may be initiated by a king or the leadership of a tribe, caste group, professional guild or village community. In both cases conversion may contribute to spiritual illumination and the heightening of inner religious consciousness and experience. However, the immediate compulsions in group conversions are social and political; in cases of individual conversion they are spiritual. These two categories of conversion are obviously ideal. In real life, no religion is disseminated entirely either from above or from below. The spread of all great religions involved conversions of both categories. In some cases the motivations may be mixed. Nevertheless in the spread of some religions "belowness" predominated, in others "aboveness". In the absence of direct evidence on conversion, the predominance of "aboveness" or "belowness" may be determined by the rapidity of the diffusion of a religion. It is likely that a religion which has a larger share of conversion from above will spread faster than a religion disseminated from below.

Islam in South Asia experienced conversions from both above and below. Obviously, in the Punjab, Sind and NWFP there were strong tribal organizations among the Muslims. It is, therefore, likely that many of such tribes had group conversions to Islam. However, the existence of strong communal organisations is not necessarily conducive to spread of new religion; sometimes they present insurmountable barriers to conversions to a new faith. As early as 1832, Jafar Sharif, the author of *Islam in India*, offered the following explanation for the failure of Islamic missionary efforts in Delhi and Agra: "Mussalmans are not found in excessive numbers in the vicinity

of the great imperial cities like Delhi and Agra, because in these parts of the country the invaders encountered powerful Hindu tribes, like the Jats and Rajputs, intensely conservative and controlled by a strong Brahman hierarchy, which resisted proselytism" (1975, p. 3). According to distinguished historian Basham, the strong sense of community in the village was "one of the chief factors in the survival of Hindu culture" (1959, p. 191). He further maintains that "organization of the castes, independent of the government and with social ostracisms as its most severe sanction, was a powerful factor in the survival of Hinduism" (1959, p. 151). The establishment of the Muslim rule in the Gangetic valley and beyond did not, therefore, pose any serious threat to survival of Hinduism. The real barrier to spread of Islam in the Gangetic valley was not any temporal or spiritual authority at the top but innumerable village communities at the grass-roots. The village communities, which performed at the same time administrative, economic and social functions, were the real bulwarks of *Sanatan dharma*. The leadership of the village communities lay in the hands of the caste Hindus. Any alien religion that denied the caste system was a direct challenge to the social structure that nurtured Brahmanism and the vested interests of the village leadership. The village leaders, therefore, zealously guarded against any intrusion of the alien religion.

Though many Hindus in South Asian villages were individually attracted to Islam by the charisma and spiritual powers of the Muslim saints, they could not accept Islam in defiance of the wishes of village leadership. Any challenge to traditional leadership in the village would entail ostracism. The life of an ostracised person was very difficult in areas where village communities were strong. No ostracised person would be accepted in another village community. Even migration to the towns was not easy because even in towns caste-groups were predominant. In such an environment, individual conversion was not likely; mass conversion of the entire village was the easiest means of proselytization. In some areas of the Punjab a few mass conversions took place. Such mass conversions were however, limited because the village leaders who owed their economic and social existence to the traditional religion was opposed to any innovation or new religion. Consequently, many Hindus in the rural areas silently adored the Muslim saints; some of them even became disciples of the Pirs, but they did not embrace Islam (Titus 1959, pp. 160-61).

Compared to other regions of South Asia, the political, social and religious institutions at the grass-roots in Bengal were weak and loose. As already discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the village organizations in Bengal were significantly different from their north Indian counterparts.

The physical and social environment of Bengal undermined the solidarity of her village organizations. Most rural settlements in the riverine Bengal, where the supply of flood-free land was limited, were small and not entirely self-sufficient. The village organizations in Bengal were, therefore, weak. They did not function as administrative and economic units. They were merely social organizations with very limited coercive power. The ostracism in Bengal villages was much less painful than in other areas of South Asia. The ostracized households in Bengal could easily set up new homesteads outside the village where they had their own independent supply of water from tanks dug for raising the land for homestead. The authority of the village organizations was further eroded by the social environment of Bengal which received continuous immigration from the rest of South Asia.

As noted in Chapter 2, the pattern of rural settlements was not, however, uniform throughout the whole of Bengal. The corporateness of village organizations in Bengal gradually waned from the western to eastern districts. This fact was first noticed by the British administrators during the census of 1872 when they were looking for grass-roots organizations to conduct the census.

There were two consequences of the weakness of village organisations in Bengal. First, the power of the caste Hindus varied in proportion to the strength of the village government. Thus the Brahmins would prefer to stay in areas with strong village administration. The hold of Brahminism was, therefore, stronger in western Bengal. As Nihar Ranjan Roy points out, "The strongest hold of this orthodoxy (brahmanical) was Bengal, west of the Ganges at least up to the southern bank of the Ajay with its citadel presumably at Navadwipa. The more east and north the country lay from the centre of Brahmanical orthodoxy lesser was and even to-day, is, its grip on the social organization" (1945, p. 44). Secondly, the weakness of village organizations promoted unbridled individualism in much of Bengal. There was no effective restriction on individual's choice of beliefs and practices. This promoted a congenial environment for heresy, heterodoxy and esoteric practices. Islam was not the first

challenge to Hindu orthodoxy in Bengal. Bengal had long been the nursery of esoteric cults like *Shajayana, Vajrayana, Kalachakrayana* and *Nathism.*

The social environment of Bangladesh region was an advantage in the spread of Islam because there was no barrier to individual conversion in Bengal. In other regions of South Asia the converts would be expelled from the village community and costs of such ostracism were very high. The Bangladesh region where rural organizations were weak, the costs of such ostracisms were less. The people in Bangladesh region could therefore, risk the hazards of conversion to a new religion. Viewed in this perspective, individual conversion to Islam was more frequent in areas where the Brahmins oppressed less than in areas where the hold of Brahminism was strong. In other words, the people in Bengal could not have accepted Islam in such large numbers if the Brahmins had unchallenged authority in the social life.

It is interesting to note that in the same social environment where Islamic proselytization succeeded, Christian evangelical efforts failed. Apparently, there were similarities between missionary efforts of the Muslims and Christians in Bengal. Like the Muslims, the Christians also captured state machinery in Bengal and launched intensive missionary activities. However, they are not really comparable for three reasons. First, Christianity came to Bengal as a religion from the modern West whereas Islam came from medieval Asia, which was more comprehensible to the people of Bengal. Secondly intensive Christian evangelization in Bengal lasted less than 150 years whereas Islamic proselytization lasted over four hundred years. Finally, Christianity in the British India had to compete with Hindu and Muslim revivalisms which were largely triggered by the political domination of the West.

There are also some apparent similarities in the spread of Islam in Bengal and in Indonesia. Some of the islands of Indonesia and Bengal were densely populated. In both areas proselytization started long after Islam's advent. The conversion to Islam in Bengal started on a significant scale in the thirteenth century; in Indonesia it began in the fifteenth century. In both regions, Islamic proselytization lasted for a long time. In Bengal it continued for over four hundred years. In Indonesia also the process of conversion to Islam went on for a long time and continued even after the establishment of the Dutch rule in the region. There is, however, one significant difference

between Indonesia and Bengal. In Bengal, Islam was propagated primarily through individual conversions. In Indonesia and Malaysia group conversions were predominant. The conversion to Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia started with the conversion of the king of Malacca in the 15th century. This was followed by the conversions of the kings of Makazar, Baten and Mataram. Islam in Indonesia was accepted by fledgling princes seeking legitimacy (Ziauddin 1970, pp. 57-84). The preponderance of conversion from above in Indonesia may be attributed to two factors. First, despite Indonesia's similarity to Bengal in hydrological conditions, group solidarity in Indonesia was stronger than in Bengal. This may be attributed to urgency of protection against continuous attacks of the pirates and wild animals in Indonesia. Furthermore, conversion to an alien faith in Indonesia is not at all novel. Hinduism and Buddhism in Indonesia also started as court religions which percolated later to common people.

In short, the spread of Islam in Bengal offers a unique example of conversion from below. A protracted proselytization was carried on over four hundred years by innumerable Muslim preachers who took the message of Islam to every nook and corner of Bengal. While similar Islamic missionary activities failed in other regions of South Asia, Islam ultimately succeeded in penetrating deeply into Bangladesh region because the social environment of this area was congenial to the diffusion of a new religion. In much of South Asia, strong village communities were impenetrable barriers to the spread of Islam. In Bangladesh region, institutions in rural areas were weak and ineffective. As a result, heterodoxy in this region always prospered. Individual conversions induced by inner religious urges silently swelled the Muslim population in Bengal.

Chapter 5

DYNAMICS OF DICHOTOMY AND CONFRONTATION

The Muslim rule in Bengal (1203-1757) witnessed the crystallization of the forces of both unity and division in the society. The political unification of the areas within natural limits of Bengal zone was a gift of the Muslim rulers. The vernacular Bengali language also flowered under the umbrella of Muslim rule. Unlike their indigenous predecessors, the Muslim rulers in Bengal actively patronized Bengali language and literature. The intellectual ferment in the wake of spread of Islam contributed to development of the vernacular that carried stirring messages of competing faiths to unlettered masses.

Political and linguistic unity was, however, counterbalanced by the divisive forces of cultural dichotomy and new forms of economic polarization which reinforced each other. Islam was the first major alien religion in Bengal. Deeply rooted in the Semitic heritage, Islam not only created a profound chasm between local and alien beliefs and rituals but also nurtured among the believers conflicting emotions about the faith and the habitat. The Muslim rule in Bengal also added a new dimension to her economic life. "Taxation raised by a King", says the Indian poet, "is like the moisture of the earth sucked up by the sun, to be returned to the earth as fertilizing rain" (Dutt 1966, vol. I, p. xxvii). This held true about pre-Muslim Bengal, where except brief interludes, the rulers were independent and did not, therefore, pay any tribute to overlords abroad.

The Muslim rule in Bengal established a system of drain of resources to north India. Most Muslim rulers in Bengal were immigrants from the Middle East. They either acted as agents of Delhi-based empires or used Bengal as the base in their bid for political supremacy in north India. The Muslim rule, therefore, contributed to a significant drain of resources from Bengal to north India. The system of unilateral transfer of resources from Bengal did not, however, cease with the end of Muslim rule It continued with increased intensity to new destinations in post-Muslim Bengal. Each shift in the pattern of economic drain was accompanied by a new social configuration. The realignments of social groups were supported by ideological reorientations. Cultural dichotomy and polarization of social forces fortified each other.

Opinions differ on the degree of Islamization of the Muslim society in medieval Bengal. According to a school of historians, the Muslims in medieval Bengal, regulated their life in accordance with the basic tenets of Islam (Ali 1985, Vol. IB; Rahim 1963, Vol. I). Relying on Mukundaram's pen picture of the daily life of the Muslims of Hasanhati, these historians maintain that the Muslims in medieval Bengal scrupulously performed the prescribed religious rites and ceremonies. Literary sources also refer to the proficiency of the mullas in the scriptures. The critics of this interpretation maintain that it oversimplifies the complex religious life of common people by altogether ignoring syncretistic tradition that blended an alien faith with folk beliefs and rituals in Bengal.

Asim Roy (1983) and Richard M. Eaton (1994) suggest that the degree of Islamization in medieval Bengal has been exaggerated in the traditional literature. There are two types of historical sources which support this hypothesis. First, there is a vast corpus of religious and semi-religious literature in Bengal which articulated a syncretistic tradition that combined the elements of folk religions with that of Islam. Secondly, the descriptions of Muslim life by the British administrators as well as the Muslim fundamentalist reformers in the nineteenth century attest to the existence of folk beliefs and practices among the unlettered Muslim peasantry in Bengal (Ahmed 1981, pp 39-71). The main conclusions of Roy and Eaton are as follows:

1. The new converts in Bengal were not spiritually inspired by ideals of Islam. As Roy puts it: "Conversion in Bengal, as elsewhere in South Asia, involved more an immediate "change

of fellowship" than a "spiritual experience". Eaton argues that the term conversion is misleading in the context of Bengal because the Muslims in Bengal did not wholly reject their pre-Islamic beliefs and replace them by altogether new ideas. In the words of Eaton, "Indeed the idea of Islam as a closed system with definite and rigid boundaries is itself largely a product of nineteenth and twentieth century reform movements, whereas for the rural Bengalis of the pre-modern period, the line separating "non-Islam" from "Islam" appears rather to have been porous, tenuous and shifting" (1994, p. 273).

2. Muslims in Bengal were exclusive products of neither Islam nor Hinduism but of a single folk culture. Folk Islam in Bengal hardly had any connexion with the dogmas of religion. A number of Muslim cultural mediators presented an indigenous version of Islam to the masses of Bengali believers. In the process Allah was identified with "Gosai" (Master), "Prabhu" (lord), "Niranjan"(one without colour), "Iswar" (God), "Jagat Iswar" (God of the Universe) and "Kartar" (creator). An attempt was also made to relate the Islamic concept of *nabi* (a receiver of the divine message) and *rasul* (receiver of a scripture) to the Hindu concept of *avatar* (incarnation of God). Historical myths and cosmogonical ideas presented in medieval Bengali literature were deeply influenced by indigenous traditions.
3. Both Roy and Eaton identifies three stages of Islamization in Bengal. According to Roy, the first stage of Islamization was confined to a change of commensal and connubial relations of the converts. The second stage witnessed the emergence of a syncretistic tradition that resolved the conflicts between exogenous Islamic great tradition and endogenous little tradition. The final stage ended in a victory of the fundamentalist and revivalist forces in Islam that cleansed the effect of folk traditions which were inconsistent with the spirit of classical Islam. Eaton identified the stages as (1) inclusion, (2) identification, and (3) displacement. The inclusion refers to the process of acceptance of Islamic superhuman agencies alongside indigenous divinities. The identification process blended Islamic and indigenous superhuman agencies in a syncretistic tradition. Through the process of displacement, local superhuman agencies were finally weeded out and fundamentalist Islam triumphed.

The syncretistic model of Islam in medieval Bengal as propounded by Roy and Eaton provides very useful insights into the process of interaction between endogenous and exogenous forces. It, however, suffers from four serious limitations. First, it underestimates the significance of conversion to Islam. Any contact with a Muslim—not to speak of formal conversion to Islam, involved loss of caste status. Manu, the great Hindu law giver, directed that none should converse or sit with a person who loses caste, give him his inheritance or so forth, or have any ordinary casual contact with him. It was further laid down that a man falls himself if he associates with a fallen man (Manu 1991, pp. 268-269). The punishment for losing caste is not confined to the present birth alone, it continues in future births. Even the performance of virtuous deeds would not automatically lead to restoration of caste status in this birth. In Manu's view, the lower caste may reach the status of birth in higher caste after the seventh generation (Manu, 1991, p. 243). For the Hindus, the change of social groups was much more difficult than a radical transformation of inner faiths. As Bouquet (1964)—a scholar on comparative religion, rightly argues, "Despite efforts to represent it as in essence a universal faith, Hinduism is in its outlook as much restricted as Judaism. True, it has certain fundamental ideas which might be easily transplanted, but as an institutional system it is, as much as Nazism, a matter of 'race and blood' and is properly confined to those who belong to some specific caste, so that the only way of admission is to be incorporated as a member of a fresh caste. Once inside this rigid hierarchy, one can believe or disbelieve as much or as little one likes. Room is made for the grossest idolatory and superstition, and equally for non-theistic philosophy and for pious theism"(p. 146). In the same vein, Gait wrote in the census report of 1911, "The Hindu word "dharma" which corresponds most closely to our word "religion" connotes conduct more than creed. In India, the line of cleavage is social rather than religious, and the tendency of the people themselves is to classify their neighbours, not according to their beliefs, but according to their social status and manner of living. No one is interested in what his neighbours believe, but he is very much interested in knowing whether he can eat with him or take water from his hands"(1913, Vol. I, pt. 1, p. 113). Given the severe penalties of loss of caste status resulting from conversion, it is highly unlikely that a person would embrace Islam without strong spiritual urge or a genuine change of heart. Conversion

to Islam must have given new meaning and intensity to their lives. It is not, therefore, correct to assume that conversion to Islam entailed merely the change of social groups and not spiritual solace and illumination.

Secondly, the syncretistic model ignores altogether the fundamentalist tradition that existed side by side with the syncretistic tradition. The proponents of syncretistic model focus exclusively on a particular genre of medieval Bengali literature. It is true that the syncretistic genre was the most numerous among the writings of Muslims in medieval Bengal. It is also inevitable that in the process of composing books on Muslim myths, history and tradition in Bengali language, indigenous concepts and terms would creep in. However, even the authors of syncretistic works like Syed Sultan ultimately drew on Islamic and not on Indian ideas. Apart from the syncretistic literary sources, there were in medieval Bengal a large number of works of liturgical and didactic in nature which were faithful to fundamentalist tradition. The following works of this genre deserve special mention: Afzal Ali's *Nasihat*, Khwandkar Nasr Allah Khan's *Musar Swwal* and *Sharia Nama*, Shaikh Muttalib's *Kifayat*, Syed Alawal's *Tuhfa*, Khwandkar Abdul Karim's *Hazar Masail*, Shah Abdul Hakim's *Shihab*, Hayat Mahmud's *Hitajnan* etc. The existence of fundamentalist tradition is also attested by hagiographical literature. The biographers of Shaikh Nur Qutb mention that he used to lay great stress on the strict observance of the *shariat* in letter as well as in spirit. This was also enjoined in the *Khilafat Namas* sworn by the designated representatives of Nur Qutb-i-Alam in the following manner:

> "I do pledge before the Shaikh (or Pir) that I shall withhold my hands, tongue and eyes from what is unlawful and I shall not cause injury to anyone with my hands and tongue and shall not do any work against the *Sharia*. And I shall offer prayer punctually and avoid the company of evil (persons)" (Quoted in Latif 1993, p.79).

Thirdly, syncretistic beliefs and rituals did not make the Muslims fully acceptable to their Hindu neighbours. There are two minor sects whose common beliefs and practices were shared by Hindus and Muslims. "Bauls" who believed in the simple man's search for what they described as the "Man of my heart" *(Maner Manush)* were drawn from the lowest starta of the Hindus and Muslims (Sen 1961). The Kartabhaja sect which was founded by Aul Chand and Ram Smaran Pal recruited followers from both Muslims and non-Muslims

(Latif 1993). However, these minor sects remained outside the mainstream society and was often looked down upon by the orthodox members of both Hindu and Muslim communities.

"There is", said the sixteenth century poet Jayananda, "age-long conflict between the Brahmins and the *Yavana* (the Mussalmans)" (Latif 1993, pp. 95-96). The Muslims and their associates were promptly excommunicated by the orthodox Hindus who treated Muslims as *Yavanas* and *Mlechhas* implying untouchables. New mixed sub-castes were often formed to incorporate the excommunicated associates of Muslims. The *Pir 'ali'* Brahmin subcaste is a case in point. According to legends, Pir Ali Khan, himself a converted Muslim feudal lord, commanded the presence of some orthodox Brahmins at his house at a time when beef was being cooked. He arranged the cooking in such a manner that the smell of beef-cooking pervaded the courtyard where the Brahmins assembled. Since the Hindus believe that smelling was half-eating, the assembled Brahmins were polluted on charge of beef-eating. Some of them accepted Islam to avoid social stigma; other ostracized Brahmins formed a sub-caste of their own and were known as *Pir 'ali'* Brahmins (Rahim 1963, Vol. I, pp 313-314). Similarly the Sher Khani subcaste of Brahmins included the associates of emperor Sher Khan. *Srimant Khani* Brahmans of east Bengal were polluted because of their social relationship with the Muslim feudal lords. The rigid caste system of Hindus precluded any meaningful dialogue between Islam and Hinduism. The Islamic syncretistic tradition could not altogether smooth out the trauma of conversion from Hinduism to Islam.

Finally, both Roy and Eaton hypothesise that un-Islamic practices, beliefs and rituals were rampant in the initial stages of Bengali Muslim society because of the pervasive influence of indigenous faiths and traditions. They maintain that weeding out of un-Islamic practices in the final phase of Islamization was unique to Bengal. There are, however, two major weaknesses of this thesis. First, Islam came to Bengal seven hundred years after its birth. The classical tenets of Islam were already modified in many ways long before Islam came to Bengal. Many of the un-Islamic practices did not originate in Bengal. As Ali rightly argues, "The existence of such innovations and superstitions have too often been explained as the result of Bengali Muslims being mostly converts from Hindus etc. who are said to have retained many of their previous un-Islamic beliefs and practices. Such a view is clearly superficial. A little closer

look would at once show that the innovations and superstitions that are noticeable among the Muslims of Bengal were in a large measure imported by the immigrant Muslims themselves, though these received further accretions from un-Islamic beliefs and practices" (1985, pp 799-800). The sufi practices, pirism, shrine-worship etc. did not originate in Bengal, they constituted essential ingredients of Islam which was propagated in Bengal. Roy-Eaton hypothesis, therefore, overstates the effects of syncretistic tradition. Secondly, the revivalist and fundamentalist movements that purified Islam in Bengal were not at all indigenous in origin, they were also imported from outside. Similar revivalist and fundamentalist surges in the nineteenth century Islam could be noticed among the Tariqa-i-Mauyahidun (Wahabis) in Arabia. Sanussi in north Africa, Salfis in Egypt and Syria, Fulanis in Sudan and Nigeria, Tariqa-i-Muhammediyah and Ahla-i-Hadis in north India and Paduri and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia (Khan, M.A. 1992). The movement to purify Islam was not, therefore, at all unique to Bengal. Muslims throughout the world passed through similar Islamization process.

An analysis of the competing interpretations on the degree of Islamization of Muslim society in Bengal suggests that it is not correct to assume that fundamentalism followed syncretism. On the other hand, fundamentalism and syncretism existed side by side and competed with each other. Fundamentalism by decrying everything local in the un-Islamic land of Bengal—its language and culture including personal and family names, espoused extra-territorial loyalties. The urge for restoration of the pristine purity of Islam prompted the believers to look towards the Middle East in quest of their Islamic roots. The extra-territorial propensities among the Muslims of Bengal were encouraged by Muslim immigrants who constituted the ashraf in Bengal. This tendency is evident in Urdu language which was the mother tongue of the ashraf in Bengal. As a perceptive student of Muslim culture rightly observed, "Urdu poetry exuded the nostalgia for lands that had been left behind long ago but never forgotten. It sang of the cooler lands where roses bloomed and nightingales sang, where lilies made the air fragrant and tulips carpeted the forests, where the plane trees brightened the autumn with their red leaves and cypresses stood sentinel on the running springs" (Qureshi 1965, pp 12-13). However, many Muslims in Bengal appreciated the absurdity of such nostalgia. As a local Bengali Muslim writer in the beginning of this century argued, "Many of us are still

deluded. When going to sleep in the mango groves or bamboo forests of Bengal they still dream of Baghdad, Bokhara, Kabul and Kandhara" (Quoted in Islam 1973, p. 226). The inner contradictions of Bengal Muslims were further intensified by economic and social changes since the emergence of the Muslim rule.

From the sociological point of view, four distinct phases in the evolution of Muslim society in Bengal may be identified. The first phase which lasted from 1204 to 1757 A.D. was characterized by the domination of a coalition of immigrant Muslims (who were styled as *ashraf)* and the Hindu upper castes. The second phase which lasted from 1757 to 1870s witnessed the domination of a coalition of the British rulers and upper caste Hindu gentry. The third phase which started in 1870s was distinguished by conflicts between Hindu and Muslim elites as well as conflicts between the Muslim elites themselves. The final phase which started in the 1940s witnessed the ultimate triumph of the vernacular Muslim elite.

The immigrant Muslims occupied the apex of social hierarchy in Bengal during the Muslim rule. In fact, foreign origin, even if remote, was considered as a sufficient condition for *ashraf* identity in Bengal. The Muslim elites who were primarily urban consisted of government officials, urban sufis, ulama (religious officials) and foreign-born soldiers. The size of the immigrant Muslim elite in Bengal was small. They were divided into innumerable factions which were competing with each other. In the absence of well-de fined village government, it was very difficult to run local government including collection of land revenue without the active cooperation of local intermediaries. It was also easier for the Muslim rulers to control the Hindu intermediaries who were politically powerless. This is why, the running of day to day administration was left in the hands of Hindu upper castes. The Kayasthas who were dominant land-holding caste prior to the Muslim conquest were mainly recruited for these jobs. According to Abul Fadl, the sixteenth century Mughal historian, most of the Bengal zamindars were Kayasthas. He was of the opinion that the Kayastha caste included remnants of Bengal's ruling dynasties such as the Sena, Pala, Chandra, Varman etc. As early as the fifteenth century, a Sufi saint lamented, "The vanquished unbelievers with heads hanging down, exercise their power and authority to administer the lands which belong to them. But they have also been appointed (executive) officers over the Muslims in the lands of Islam and they impose their orders on them.

Such things should not happen" (Quoted in Eaton 1994, p. 50). The Muslim rule in Bengal was thus in effect a coalition of immigrant Muslims and upper caste Hindus. Throughout the Muslim rule the Hindu upper classes were treated with respect (Rahim 1963). During the Sultanate period (1204-1577 A.D.) the Hindu nobility was considered equal to foreign-born Muslim nobility. In the initial years of Mughal rule, some Hindus were displaced from the upper echelons of administration. However, Hindu domination at the grass-roots was not disturbed. In the later stages of Mughal rule, Hindu upper castes were firmly entrenched in the highest tiers of Bengal's political and social hierarchy.

Because of the significant drain of resources from Bengal to Delhi, economic exploitation intensified during the Muslim rule. Tax/GDP ratio is estimated at about 43.8 percent in the hey days of the Mughal rule in Bengal (Khan 1992). The main victims of this exploitative system were locally converted Muslims and lower caste Hindus. Contrary to popular beliefs, local converts to Islam most of whom came from lower caste Hindus, did not get any economic relief from the Muslim rule. They continued with the old hereditary professions even after their conversion to Islam. The converts from lower castes were not accepted into Muslim nobility in Bengal. Both the local converts and lower caste Hindus continued to be exploited with increasing intensity by a coalition of immigrant Muslim nobility and collaborationist Hindu upper castes specially the Kayasthas. Resistance to intense exploitation could not crystallize for two reasons. First, there was no effective organization at the grass-roots to mobilize the exploited. In *raiyatwari* villages of north India, resistance was often organised by the village leadership (Habib 1985). Similarly, resistance to outside exploitation was more frequent in tribal areas where some form of collective leadership existed. Secondly, economic exploitation in medieval Bengal did not proceed along communal lines. The immigrant Muslims and upper caste Hindus jointly exploited locally converted Muslims and lower caste Hindus. The organization of resistance under communal leadership was, therefore, precluded.

Because a proficiency in the Arabic and Persian languages was essential for grasping the fundamentals of Islam, local converts had to depend on the immigrant Muslims for interpretation of Islamic principles. All Muslim immigrants were not, however, devout Muslims. The administrators and the soldiers were primarily interested in worldly

affairs. The ulama kept alive the tradition of Islamic fundamentalism though the majority of local converts were largely influenced by syncretistic tradition.

The social life in Bengal was characterised by the primacy of individuals. The villagers had, therefore, been accustomed to religious dissent and heresy. The Hindu and Muslim communities could, therefore, easily work out a modus vivendi. However, the rapid expansion of Islam posed a challenge to both Hindu and Muslim religious leaders. The orthodox Hindus, despite their political reconciliation with Muslim rulers despised the Muslims as Mlechhas (Rahim 1963). The Muslim religious leaders were also scornful of the customs and practices of local converts. "The natives of this country", asserted a Muslim historian in the eighteenth century, "are of shabby tastes, shabby habits and shabby modes of dress" (Eaton 1994, p. 170). Despised by both Muslim nobility and Hindu upper castes, the converts to Islam in Bengal faced a dichotomy of faith and habitat. This duality of mind can be traced in the medieval Bengali literature from the fourteenth to seventeenth century. The conflict between religion and language is evident in the writings of Shah Md. Saghir, Muzammil, Syed Sultan, Muhammad Khan, Shaikh Muttalib, Abdul Hakim, Abdul Nabi etc. These inner conflicts of the Muslims of Bengal were initially confined to cultural sphere, they did not surface in the political and economic arena till the advent of the British rule.

Whereas the Muslim rule in Bengal divided the Muslims socially and economically, the British rule united them unwittingly. The early British rulers in Bengal unleashed a reign of terror in the economic sphere. "The conduct of the company's servants upon this occasion", observed the British historian James Mill, "furnishes one of the most remarkable instances upon record of the power of interest to extinguish all sense of justice, and even of shame" (Quoted in Dutt 1960, Vol. I, p. 21). The sea-change in economic structure of Bengal under the British rule deprived the Muslim aristocracy of all political and economic privileges. The British administrator W.W. Hunter observed that before the British rule in Bengal impoverished ashraf families were difficult to find and after seventy-five years of British administration solvent families are rare (Hunter 1945). The economic distress of the Muslim ashraf under the British Raj narrowed the gulf between declassed Muslim aristocracy and exploited Muslim peasantry.

The British rule in Bengal accentuated the fundamentalist and extra-territorial loyalties among the Muslims in three ways. First, the communal dimension of economic exploitation of Muslim peasantry during the Muslim rule was obscured because Hindu exploiters of Muslim peasants themselves were the intermediaries of Muslim rulers. The disappearance of the Muslim rule in Bengal pitted the Muslim peasants against Hindu and Christian exploiters and thereby stimulated communalism. Secondly, revolutionary improvements in the transportation system brought the Muslims of Bengal closer to the wider world of Islam. This was noted by the nineteenth century British administrator H.H. Risley who rightly observed, "Even the distant Mecca has been brought, by means of Messrs. Cook's steamers and return tickets within reach of the faithful in India and the influence of Mohamedan missionaries and return pilgrims had made itself felt in a quiet but steady revival of orthodox usage in Eastern Bengal" (1981, Vol. I, XXX). Finally, the world of Islam was in ferment in the nineteenth century. The Islamic revivalist movements like Tariqa-i-Mauyahidun (which is popularly known as Wahabi movement) arose in the Middle East to purge all religious corruption with the avowed objective of returning to the simplicity of the faith as propagated by the prophet. Fundamentalist creeds that galvanized the faithful in the wider world of Islam easily percolated to Bengal through the institution of hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).

The leadership of the fundamentalist upsurge among the Muslims of Bengal came from the lower rungs of Muslim aristocracy. Following Ahmed (1981), the Muslim aristocracy in Bengal in the 19th century may be divided into three categories: Mughal ashraf or exclusively Urdu speaking urban elites, who were the descendants of foreign immigrants; the mofassil gentry who aspired to emulate the Mughal ashraf but were conversant with local ways of life because of their close link with the local population as zamindars and social superiors; and the lesser ashraf who were locally settled descendants of the immigrants in rural areas. Despite their foreign ancestry and romantic attachment to foreign languages, the lesser ashraf spoke Bengali. Crippled by the economic dominance of Hindu intermediaries, the lesser ashraf took the initiative in organizing politically the Muslim peasants and in purifying them ideologically.

The Faraidi movement led by Haji Shariatullah and his son Dudu Mian, the Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyah led by Mir Nisar Ali alias Titumir, Ahli Hadith movement led by Maulana Vilayat Ali, the Tayuni

movement led by Maulana Keramat Ali disseminated fundamentalist versions of Islam in the nineteenth century. The Faraidi and Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya reformers also organized political resistance against the exploitation of Hindu landlords and the British rulers. The immediate gains of fundamentalist reform movements among the Muslims in the nineteenth century were limited. The abortive revolts could not at all shake the political framework established by the Raj. Ahmed concluded that the reformists succeeded in converting only a fraction of the Muslim population to fundamentalist doctrines (1981, p. 70). Nevertheless, these movements had two profound consequences on the evolution of Muslim society in Bengal. First, the political movements organized by the fundamentalist reformers mobilized for the first time, the Muslims of Bengal along communal lines. They aroused new awareness and political consciousness among the Muslim peasants in Bengal. They demonstrated for the first time the potentialities of fundamentalist ideology in mobilizing amorphous Muslim masses. Secondly, fundamentalist reforms promoted extra-territorial loyalties among the Muslims in Bengal. By denouncing local cults and practices among the Muslims, these reformers emphasized the need for renouncing the immediate milieu in favour of the dictates of the faith which existed in its pure form in the Middle Eastern countries. These extra-territorial loyalties were reinforced by the Muslim ashraf. Despite their differences over political strategies, all sections of Muslim aristocracy espoused fundamentalist Islam. The overwhelming majority of the ashraf were the descendants of the immigrants from the Middle East. They retained their alien habits and customs; they used to speak in Urdu and never accepted Bengali as their mother tongue. They despised not only local customs and practices, but also the vernacular and local ways of life.

Apart from the Faraidi and Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya uprisings of the Muslim peasants, Bengal in the nineteenth century also witnessed two general peasant uprisings (the Indigo Revolt (1858-60), and the Pabna Riots (1872-73) which were participated by both Hindu and Muslim peasants. However, the real contradiction in the nineteenth century Bengal did not arise from the conflict between the British imperialists and landlords on the one hand and the peasants on the other side. The ultimate contradiction in this society arose from the scramble for power among the middle classes which originated from the changes introduced by the imperialist rulers.

The middle classes in Bengal differed from their western counterparts in two significant ways. First, the middle class in Europe primarily originated in urban areas. It consisted of merchants and industrialists together with the intellectuals and persons belonging to learned professions. The main source of their livelihood did not come from agriculture though some of them purchased landed estates for the sake of prestige and livelihood. The middle classes in Bengal had their roots in the agrarian system. Secondly, the middle class in European countries was homogeneous. Because of uneven economic development of regions as well as of communities, the middle classes in Bengal were heterogeneous and were at odds not only with other classes but also with each other. Three distinct middle classes arose in Bengal at the turn of the nineteenth century—Hindu bhadralok, Muslim ashraf and the Muslim jotedars who constituted a vernacular elite.

Though the Hindu upper castes enjoyed special privileges as intermediaries under the Muslim rule, the Hindu middle class in Bengal was primarily a product of the system of property relations established by the Permanent Settlement in 1793. The Hindu middle class since the nineteenth century used to style itself as *bhadralok* (gentlefolk) in contradistinction to others whom they contemptuously labelled as *chotolok* (lowly persons). From the economic point of view, the bhadralok comprised heterogeneous groups such as urban professionals, rural zamindars and taluqdars, westernised intelligentsia, traditional gentry, well-to-do notables and ordinary clerics. The term bhadralok was described by Broomfield in the following manner: " a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical appointment; keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of high caste proscriptions and its command of education; sharing a pride in its language, its literate culture and its history; and maintain ing its communal integration through a fairly complex institutional structure that it had proved remarkably ready to adapt and augment to extend its social power and political opportunities" (1968, pp. 12-13). In recent studies, the usefulness of "bhadralok" paradigm has been questioned because the term is inexact and diffuse. Despite wide differences in economic status of various groups, the bhadralok in Bengal who were also known as babus acted as a pressure group till the middle of the 20th century. They were bound together by several ties. First, the bhadralok status was linked to

Hindu upper caste exclusiveness. The bulk of the bhadralok belonged to the Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya castes. According to the census of 1921 the total number of bhadralok stood at nearly three millions (about 6.5 percent of total population and about 15 percent of total Hindu population). Secondly, though most bhadralok derived their income from agriculture, they did not cultivate their own land but lived off the rental income generated from their land. The bhadralok was averse to manual labour (Porter 1933, pp 287-289). Thirdly, the bhadralok was an aristocracy based on education and culture. The bhadralok developed a thirst for western education. During the Muslim rule, the Hindu aristocracy mastered the Persian language to serve as scribes at Muslim courts. They readily discerned the potentialities of English language as the lever for power that provided privileged access to government employment and consequently some measure of authority under the Raj.

Despite its inherent weaknesses, the bhadralok played a highly creative role in the Bengali renaissance in the nineteenth century. "If Periclean Athens; "rhapsodized Sir Jadunath Sarker", was the school of Hellas, "the eye of Greece, mother of arts and eloquence" that was Bengal to the rest of India under British rule, but with a borrowed light, which it had made its own with a marvellous cunning. In this new Bengal originated every good and great thing of the modern world that passed on to the other provinces of India. From Bengal went forth the English-educated teachers and the Europe-inspired thought that helped to modernize Bihar and Orissa, Hindustan and Deccan. New literary types, reform of the language, social reconstruction, political aspirations, religious movements and even changes in manners that originated in Bengal, passed like ripples from a central eddy, across provincial barriers to the furthest corners of India" (Sarkar 1976, p. 498). Nineteenth century Bengal telescoped renaissance, reformation, and counter-reformation in a short span of time. The leading lights of this intellectual ferment which included Rammohan Roy, Michael Madushudan Dutt, Bankim Chandra, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Vivekananda, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, R.C. Dutt, Akshay Kumar Mitra, D.L. Roy, Girish Chandra Ghose and above all Rabindranath Tagore were all Hindu bhadralok. Modern Bengal itself was thus created by the bhadralok. Nevertheless, the bhadralok was neither respected by the British Raj nor loved by the rural masses. Isolated from the rest of the society and exclusively preoccupied with myopic selfish interests, the bhadralok

in Bengal gradually drifted from nationalism to communalism. As Chatterji (1995) rightly argues that communalism in Bengal was not exclusively confined to Muslims, a parallel Hindu communalism developed in Bengal under the leadership of the bhadralok who were animated by revivalist ideologies. In its quest for a glorious Hindu past, the bhadralok denigrated the Muslim rule and romanticized the achievements of pre-Muslim rulers. Aurobindo Ghose propounded political Vedanta which identified the nation with mother Goddess Kali. Bepin Chandra Pal and Sarala Devi introduced Kali Puja and Shivaji festivals. The Bengali terrorists who were drawn primarily from the bhadralok were inspired by Sakta philosophy. Some bhadralok political leaders like C.R. Das drew their inspiration from vaisnavism and teachings of Ramkrishna and Vivekananda. The crux of difference between Hindu bhadralok and abhadra (non-bhadralok) lay in culture—a quality of mind nurtured by English education. The Muslims were considered distinctly inferior to Hindus. Hindustan asserted the distinguished bhadralok novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterji, "is the homeland of the Hindus" (1392 B.S., p. 2136).

There were two distinct Muslim middle classes in Bengal: the ashraf (traditional aristocracy) and the vernacular elite which consisted primarily of educated jotedars. The traditional aristocracy were mainly the descendants of immigrants Muslims. As mentioned earlier, there were three components of the ashraf: urdu-speaking Mughal ashraf, bilingual mofassil gentry and Bengali-speaking lesser gentry. Culturally, the urdu-speaking Mughal ashraf were the role models and trend-setters. They were concentrated mostly in towns like Dhaka, Calcutta, Murshidabad and Hoogly. In the absence of any countervailing group, the immigrant ashraf became the natural leaders of Muslim community in Bengal. Because of its feudalistic roots, the urdu-speaking Muslim ashraf in Bengal was fundamentalist in religion and reactionary in politics. Nevertheless it imposed its ethos on the incipient vernacular elite through the process of acculturation.

The vernacular elite among the Muslims of Bengal surfaced at the turn of the nineteenth century. They were the products of the economic changes which resulted from the emergence of international economy in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Muslim peasants in eastern Bengal were benefited by the expansion of jute exports in the closing decades of the nineteenth century (see

Table 11). Jute was not new to peasants of Bengal. However, the cultivation of this crop was limited by domestic demand. The dramatic rise in demand for jute in the international market led to a significant expansion of jute cultivation in Bengal. The increase in export of this commercial crop largely benefited the surplus farmers in eastern Bengal where the Muslims were in a majority (Khan 1982, pp 117-118). Agriculture in eastern Bengal was further commercialised by the introduction of the railways. These economic shifts contributed to the emergence of a new middle class among the Muslims of Bengal. Opinions, however, differ on the appropriate nomenclature of this class. Broomfield described it as a "parvenu class"—"fat cats" among the generally poor rural populace (1992, p. 365). Hashmi (1994) describes them as jotedars. Broadly speaking, jotedars comprised different types of intermediaries and surplus farmers. Legally all jotdedars holding more than 33 acres of land were presumed to be tenure-holders or holding land directly under a proprietor or zamindar. Most jotedars acted as intermediaries in rent-collection between the landlords and small and marginal farmers. Many jotedars were also money-lenders. Some of them were rich peasants and were known as *talukdars*, *haoladars*, *latdars*, *basunias* and *mandals*. Thus Hashmi's jotedar class includes a wide variety of economic interests. However, jotedars did not become automatically middle class. It is only the educated jotedars who actively asserted their middle class identity. It is, therefore, more appropriate to describe this class as a vernacular elite.

The vernacular elite may be differentiated from the nonvernacular elite in several ways (Jahan 1994, pp. 58-59). First, the vernacular elite speaks in local language, the non-vernacular elite speaks in foreign language. The difference is not merely linguistic, their cultural orientations also differ. Even if the vernacular elite is educated in foreign language, it remains loyal to local culture and is not absorbed by foreign culture. Secondly, the vernacular elite usually originated in rural areas and small towns. The nonvernacular elite comes from the urban areas. Thirdly, the nonvernacular elite is usually more well-off than the vernacular elite. The main source of livelihood of the vernacular elite is agriculture whereas, the nonvernacular elites derive their income from urban professions or rent from rural areas. The vernacular Muslim elites in Bengal in early decades of this century consisted primarily of the educated jotedars and surplus farmers.

Table 11. Export of jute from Bengal, 1855-57 to 1905-14

Period	Average quantity of annual jute exports (in million cwt)
1855-1864	.0.82
1864-1874	3.89
1875-1884	6.28
1885-1894	6.29
1895-1904	12.11
1905-1914	15.14

Source : Khan, Akbar Ali. *Some Aspects of Peasant Behaviour in Bengal: A Neo-classical Analysis* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1983), p.2.

The newly acquired affluence of rich farmers in east Bengal encouraged the spread of literacy among the Muslim jotedars at the turn of the century. Between 1882-83 and 1912-13, total number of Muslim students increased by 55 percent whereas total number of non-Muslim students increased by only 2.9 percent. The share of Muslim students in all educational institutions increased from 27.6% in 1882-83 to 40.5% in 1912-13 (see Table 12). The educated Muslims in rural eastern Bengal constituted the core of newly emerging vernacular elite. There was a complex love-hate relationship between the traditional Muslim aristocracy (ashraf) and the vernacular Muslim elite. Initially, the vernacular elite used to ape the traditional aristocracy in the hope of being coopted by the aristocracy. Most of the educated Muslims from rural areas used to marry into urban ashraf families. However, the aspirations of the ashraf and vernacular elite were dissimilar. Influenced by their feudalistic past, the ashraf were pro-landlord. Thwarted in their upward mobility by Hindu-landlords, the vernacular elites were opposed to landlordism. The urdu-speaking ashraf looked down on local practices and rituals. The Bengali-speaking vernacular elites were proud of their cultural heritage. The ashraf espoused Islamic fundamentalism, the vernacular elites were sympathetic to Islamic syncretistic tradition. The ashraf were pro-British. The vernacular elites were inspired by anti-imperialist movements. Despite the initial honeymoon between the ashraf and vernacular elites, differences between these elites were bound to surface. They were initially united only by the threat of Hindu domination.

The rivalry between the Hindu bhadralok and the ashraf came to the fore during the partition of Bengal agitation (1905-11). The official

aim of the partition of Bengal was to tone up administration in a unwieldy province with a population of 78 million and an area of 189,000 square miles. Unofficially one of the goals of partition was to undermine emerging Hindu nationalism. As one of the officials at the time of partition wrote: "Bengal united is a power, Bengal divided will pull several different ways. ...one of our main objects is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule" (Quoted in Moon 1989, p.935).

Table 12. Percentage increase in enrolment of Muslims and non-Muslims, 1882-83 to 1912-13

Type of education	Growth rate of Muslim pupils between 1882-83 to 1912-13 (in %)	Growth rate of Non-Muslim pupils between 1882-83 to 1912-13 (in %)	Percentage of Muslim pupils in 1882-83	Percentage of Muslim pupils in 1912-13
Primary	55	–12.0	23.3	43.2
Middle vernacular	24	–55.0	13.6	31.6
Middle English	869	247.0	13.1	34.8
High School	729	292.0	8.8	19.45
Professional	747	322.0	2.2	5.13
Colleges				
All types	55	2.9	27.6	40.5

Source : Ahmed, Rafiuddin, *The Bengal Muslims*, 1871-1906 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.150.

The Muslim middle classes under the leadership of Nawab of Dhaka supported the partition in the hope of currying favour of the Raj. To the Hindu bhadralok who had extensive economic interests on both sides of the partitioned Bengal, the move to segregate the Bengali-speaking areas in east Bengal was a jolting blow. They viewed it as a sinister design to weaken the political clout of the bhadralok who spearheaded the struggle for national independence. The preservation of the unity of the Golden Bengal that nourished the bhadralok community became the rallying cry of Bengali nationalists. Initially, the anti-partition movement was non-violent. As the movement gained momentum, the dark anger of the Hindu middle class found its expression in terroristic activities. The emotionally surcharged atmosphere culminated in communal riots.

The partition ultimately turned out to be a defeat for all. The Raj had to eat the humble pie and annul the partition. To the Muslims the

annulment of the partition was a major disappointment. It virtually shook their faith in the bonafides of the British Raj. To the Hindu bhadralok of Bengal, the annulment was a pyrrhic victory. As Satyamurthy puts it, "The net results of these developments in Bengal during the first decade of this century, so far as the bhadralok leadership of Bengal was concerned, lay in the exposure of its isolation, its inner contradictions and the essentially opportunistic character of its politics"(1979, p. 223).

The communal politics of confrontation and violence which erupted during the partition of Bengal was interrupted by a brief honeymoon of the two communities. The anti-British non-cooperation movement of the Indian National Congress coincided with the romantic bid of Indian Muslim leadership for restoration of the caliphate in Turkey. This created a strange coalition of the Hindu middle class and the Muslim aristocracy in South Asia. The atmosphere of confrontation further eased in Bengal with the emergence of the charismatic leadership of Chitta Ranjan Das who had the foresight to appreciate political potential of the Muslim middle classes. In 1923 Das signed a pact with Fazlul Huq, Suhrawardy and other Muslim leaders. The pact which is known as the Bengal Pact provided a mechanism for ensuring due representation of the Muslims in politics and administration (Rahim 1979, pp 232-39). The spirit of Hindu-Muslim rapprochement evaporated with the death of C.R. Das in 1925. Even if Das were alive, it is unlikely that he would have succeeded in containing the communal backlash. The main reason for the failure of Bengal Pact was that the communal issue was the crux of all-India politics. It was, therefore, not possible to have a provincial solution to the communal tangle. Furthermore, the autonomy of the provincial leaders in Bengal was considerably eroded in the context of all-India politics. The political mobilization of masses was contingent on the ability to raise financial resources. The large traders who had the capacity to finance political parties in Bengal were outsiders. The Hindu business magnets in Bengal owed their allegiance to Gandhi and the Muslim financiers were supporters of Jinnah (Gordon 1974). Consequently it was very difficult for provincial leaders to survive without the blessings of all-India leaders. Local leadership was virtually paralysed and the contradictions of all India politics were superimposed on the dilemmas in Bengal society.

The honeymoon of the Hindu and Muslim middle classes was short-lived. There was recurrence of communal riots in the 1920s

and 1930s. According to nationalist historians, communalism in Bengal was generated by the divide and rule policy of the British rulers. This view oversimplifies the complex communal relations. The communal tangle in South Asia was not created by the British rulers though they might have taken advantage of its existence. Mclane's assessment of the British policy on this issue seems to be sensible: "This choice was not as consciously devious as the phrase 'divide and rule' may sound. The choice was not usually conceived in terms of helping or discouraging communalism. Rather, British behaviour followed the traditional logic of searching for influential Indian support and of satisfying "legitimate" aspirations. Legitimacy, however, was a relative concept and it varied with the changes in the political and social condition of India" (1992, p. 345).

In the post-Khilafat-movement Bengal, two types of conflicts between the middle classes in Bengal surfaced. First, there was a direct conflict between the Hindu bhadralok and the Muslim middle classes for economic opportunities and jobs. This conflict was exacerbated by the world-wide Great Depression in the 1930s. The dramatic slump in agrarian prices forced the peasants to withhold payment of rent in cash. Rent collection fell off drastically which undermined the economic status of Hindu landlords as well as the intermediaries. The Muslim creditors also refused in many places to repay their loans to Hindu money-lenders. These chaotic conditions encouraged the Muslim jotedars to flout Hindu bhadralok in rural areas. The newly emerging vernacular elite also started competing with the bhadralok for scarce government jobs. Economic imperatives resulted in a direct confrontation between Hindu bhadralok on the one hand and the Muslim ashraf and the vernacular Muslim elite on the other hand.

Conflicts also developed within the Muslim middle classes. The outward unity of Muslim ashraf, vernacular elite and the unlettered Muslim peasantry was fragile. The interests and ideological orientations of these disparate Muslim groups were not similar. Unlike the jotedars and peasants, the ashraf in Bengal spoke urdu. The vernacular Muslim elite favoured agrarian reforms to curb the exploitation of Hindu bhadralok; the ashraf was a champion of the status quo. Islamic universalism enchanted the ashraf, the vernacular elite and peasants were intensely attached to their indigenous cultural heritage. Because of the absence of corporate institutions in the rural areas, it was not easy to mobilize politically amorphous Muslim masses in

Bengal. The only means of arousing such masses, was to appeal to religious sentiments and emotions. In this emotional environment, the natural leadership of Muslim masses in Bengal lay with the immigrant ashraf who monopolized the religious leadership. Initially the vernacular Muslim elite in Bengal was too weak to compete with the ashraf. As the number of educated Muslims from the rural areas swelled, there was increased challenge from the vernacular Muslim elite to the traditional aristocracy. These contradictions found expression in the political rivalry between the Muslim League and Krishak Praja Party and intra-party feuds within Muslim League itself.

The Pakistan resolution of 1940 was the outcome of political confrontation of two communities. It was a desperate move by the Muslims of South Asia to wring political and economic concessions from the Hindu majority. It was a bargaining ploy and not a precise constitutional formula. As Penderel Moon rightly argues, "There is some evidence that Jinnah put forward the demand for Pakistan partly as a tactical move with a view to extracting from Congress constitutional concessions that would ensure a sharing of power with the League both at the centre and in the provinces. The fact that six years later he was ready at one stage to accept something less than an absolutely independent Muslim State suggests that in 1940 he was not irrevocably wedded to this extreme demand; and some Muslim leaders were certainly not in favour of it" (1989, pp. 1091-1092). The Lahore Resolution demanded that geographically "contiguous units be demarcated into regions which should be so constituted with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the North-Western and Eastern Zone of India should be grouped to constitute Independent States in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign" (Wolpert 1984, pp. 184-185). The same demand was reiterated in the Madras Session of All India Muslim League which described the demand for Pakistan in the following manner: "the establishment of completely independent states formed by demarcating geographically contiguous units into regions which shall be so constituted with such territorial adjustments as may be necessary, that areas in which the Mussulmans are necessarily in a majority, as in the North Western and Eastern Zones of India shall be grouped together to constitute independent states as Muslim Free National Homeland in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign" (Qureshi 1969, p. 133).

From the constitutional point of view, the Lahore Resolution as reconfirmed by the Madras Resolution asserted that South Asia consisted of many nations and not two nations. It was in fact a blueprint for the balkanization of South Asia and not merely for its partition into two units. However, the operational mechanism for implementing Lahore Resolution was deliberately kept vague. The acceptance of the resolution was facilitated by the vagueness of the resolution which promised everything to everybody. Both the ashraf and the vernacular elite in Bengal endorsed the Lahore Resolution; but they did it for different reasons. Their interpretations of Lahore resolution were not similar. The ashraf led by feudal elements and financed by non-Bengali Muslim traders supported the proposal for the establishment of a state for the Muslims of South Asia. The vernacular Muslim elite maintained that the Lahore Resolution proposed the establishment of Bengal as an independent and sovereign state and not the partition of Bengal (Ahmed 1975, pp 59-73). As Chatterjee rightly observed, "In fact, the very vagueness of the 'Pakistan' idea made it a slogan of inordinate power. It could mean different things to different people and there were almost as many images of Pakistan as Jinnah had followers" (1995, 226).

The ground-swell among the Bengal Muslims in favour of Lahore Resolution was based on an alliance of the ashraf and the vernacular Muslim elite. This alliance was cemented by ever-increasing threats of Hindu militancy as well as the vagueness of Lahore Resolution which was perceived to be acceptable to all. So long as Pakistan was a dream, both the ashraf and vernacular elite were enchanted by it. The ashraf dreamt of the deliverance from Hindu tyranny in an Islamic state. The vernacular elite believed that the implementation of the Lahore Resolution would culminate in the establishment of an independent and sovereign Bengal. The second partition of Bengal in 1947 came as a sudden shock to vernacular Muslim elite who supported Lahore Resolution. In their view, it was the outcome of double betrayal. They felt that the Muslims of Bengal were betrayed both by their coreligionists in other parts of South Asia and by the upper caste Hindus in Bengal itself.

The constitutional framework envisaged in the Lahore Resolution was radically altered in 1946 by the Delhi convention of Muslim legislators under the leadership of Jinnah. This convention recommended that "two Pakistan Zones" on the North East and North West of India where the Muslims were predominantly in a majority be

constituted into a sovereign independent country rather than independent and sovereign countries. The constitutional validity of this measure was dubious. The Muslim League fought elections on the basis of its manifesto and the Lahore Resolution. Neither the manifesto of the All India Muslim League nor the Lahore Resolution was formally amended to incorporate basic shift in League's policy. The modification of Lahore resolution in such an adhoc manner was interpreted as an interim measure (Ahmed 1975, p. 136). It was thought at that time that the constitutional framework for the Indian Muslims could be easily finalized once the Hindu-Muslim issue was settled. The "moth-eaten and truncated" Pakistan that came into being in 1947 was inconsistent with aspirations of the vernacular Muslim elite in Bengal.

For the all-India Congress leadership, one Pakistan was preferable to many independent and sovereign states. Such balkanization would have undermined the very basis of an united India. However, the decision to partition Bengal was not foisted by the All-India Congress leadership on Hindu bhadralok. Ironically, the bhadralok who had fought valiantly for undoing the partition of Mother Bengal in 1906 themselves courted the second partition to forestall Muslim domination in an united Bengal. Under the Mountbatten Plan for the partition of India, the Bengal legislators were given the option to decide whether they wanted partition of Bengal. The Muslim legislators voted to incorporate the undivided Bengal in Pakistan, whereas the Hindu legislators voted to divide Bengal (Hashim 1974). As Chatterjee (1995) rightly suggests, the second partition of Bengal was accelerated not only by Muslim separatism but also by Hindu communalism in Bengal.

Pakistan which emerged constitutionally as one country in 1947 was in fact "a double country". The two wings were not only separated from each other by more than one thousand miles, they were also culturally, economically and socially different. "The cure, at least as far as the East Bengalis were concerned, proved to be worse than the disease" (Satyamurty 1979, p. 223).

The dream of Pakistan united the Muslims of Bengal; its realization divided them, As the threat of Hindu domination receded in Pakistan, the fragile unity of the ashraf and the vernacular elite fell apart. The first confrontation took place over the issue of state language. As Kedourie observed, language is "the outward sign of a group's peculiar identity and a significant means of ensuring its con-

tinuity" (Kedourie 1960, p. 71). The ashraf-vernacular elite controversy over the language issue, therefore, triggered a violent outburst.

The ashraf maintained that the Urdu which was the lingua franca of the immigrant Muslims in India should be the state language of Pakistan. As the Bengali was an offshoot of the Sanskrit language, the ashraf counted it as a Hindu language. The vernacular elite was apprehensive that the introduction of Urdu as a state language would be economically and culturally suicidal for them. They considered the move as an affront to the proud cultural heritage of the Bengalis. The vernacular elite manipulated these fears to challenge the leadership of the ashraf. The controversy over the language issue was not, however, new. As early as the seventeenth century, Poet Abdul Hakim advised those who were uneasy with the Bengali as mother tongue to migrate to other countries. Even within Muslim League itself, language controversy surfaced before the adoption of Lahore Resolution. In the Lucknow session of the All-India Muslim League in 1936 a resolution proposing Urdu as the language of Muslim India was moved. The resolution was strongly opposed by the delegates from Bengal. On the direct intervention of Jinnah, it was ultimately resolved that "wherever Urdu language is the language of the area its unhampered development and use should be upheld, and where it is not the predominant language, adequate arrangements should be made for teaching it as an optional subject" (Zaheer 1994, p. 23). This controversy continued after the adoption of Lahore Resolution. Dr. Mohammad Shahidullah, the distinguished Bengali linguist advocated as early as July 1947 to make Bengali the state language of Pakistan (Umar 1992, pp 422-423). Language movement in the 1950s finally resolved the dichotomy between indigenous and extra-territorial loyalties among the Muslims of Bengal. It resulted in an unequivocal triumph of the loyalty to the habitat and mother tongue. Through Language Movement, rightly observed Umar, the Bengali Muslims "returned to their homeland" (1969, pp. 8-11).

The relationship between east and west wings of Pakistan was the mirror-image of Hindu-Muslim relations in the undivided subcontinent. In British India, the Muslims of Bengal asserted their religious identity to escape from the economic exploitation of the Bengali Hindus who shared the same mother tongue. In the united Pakistan, the Bengalis of East Pakistan reaffirmed vigorously their cultural and linguistic identity to resist the economic exploitation of their coreligionists who spoke in a different tongue. Though history repeated

itself in Pakistan, the lessons learnt from Hindu-Muslim confrontations were forgotten. Neither in undivided India nor in undivided Pakistan could the dominant economic classes sacrifice their short term interests. Between 1949-50 and 1969-70, economic disparity ratio between East and West Pakistan increased from 21.9% to 61% (see Table 13).

Table 13. Disparities in per capita income between East and West Pakistan

		East Pakistan (1)	West Pakistan (2)	Disparity (2–1)	Disparity ratio $\frac{(2-1)\times 100}{1}$
1.	1949-50	288	351	63	21.9
2.	1954-55	294	365	71	24.1
3.	1959-60	277	367	90	32.5
4.	1964-65	303	440	137	45.2
5.	1969-70	331	533	202	61.0

Source : Rehman Sobhan 1992, p.717.

The widening of disparity was attributed directly to the discriminatory role of the state and the drain of resources from east Pakistan to west Pakistan. The vernacular elite provided the leadership in mobilizing the masses against economic deprivation and cultural discrimination. The dominant middle classes in Pakistan by its uncompromising support to a regime of exploitation paved the path for dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971.

An analysis of political dynamics of the Bengal Muslims during the last century clearly indicates that the masses were often manipulated by interest groups. The British rulers also occasionally exploited the Hindu-Muslim discord. The Muslim ashraf mobilized the Muslim masses to protect its own interests against Hindu domination. The vernacular elite in its turn organised resistance against the economic and cultural domination of the ashraf. Nevertheless, the evolution of Bangladesh cannot be explained by instrumental factors alone. Bangladesh was not invented by political elites to legitimize their powers. The contradictions which were exploited by the elites in Bangladesh were not made by them, they were deeply rooted in the history of Bangladesh. They may not be "primordial" in the literal

sense. Nevertheless there is no uniqueness in the birth of Bangladesh. What Renan said about nation-states is equally true about Bangladesh: "Man, sirs, does not improvise. The nation, even as the individual, is the end product of a long period of work, sacrifice and devotion" (Hutchinson and Smith 1994, p. 17).

CONCLUSION

On the face of it, the recent phase of Bangladesh's history is full of contradictions. A late entrant in the historical arena of an ancient subcontinent, she changed her statehood twice in less than twenty five years. Her identity was obscured by the cross-currents of history. For centuries, a large majority of the people in this region were agonized by the conflicting pulls of an universal faith and a particularist habitat. Her hastily-drawn arbitrary boundaries cut across a distinct geographical and linguistic zone. Prior to the second partition of Bengal in 1947, there was no historical unit corresponding to Bangladesh. Viewed in this perspective, Bangladesh may be interpreted as the handiwork of what the political scientists describe as instrumental factors of nationalism. As the political identity of Bangladesh in the last phase of its evolution was shaped by a tripartite conflict between the Hindu *bhadralok*, Muslim *ashraf* and vernacular Muslim elite, Bangladesh is often portrayed as a fabrication of the political elites to legitimize their power. An analysis of Bangladesh's history, however, indicates that underlying forces in Bangladesh's search for identity were deeply-rooted. The political elites did not create a new nation out of nothing; they at best accelerated the process of nationhood.

Though Bangladesh is not a well-defined natural zone, she is the centre of a distinct region from the institutional point of view. The grass-roots institutions of rural settlements in Bangladesh region were significantly different from those in other parts of South Asia. The villages in Bangladesh, it has been rightly observed, are elusive. Even after population census exercises over a century, the exact number of villages in Bangladesh is unknown. In fact, there is no consensus on the definition of village itself in this region. In north India and the Deccan, a village was a distinct administrative unit with traditional village officials, a self-sufficient economic isolate and a vibrant social entity. Though recent anthropological research debunks the romantic image of village communities in South Asia as

"little republics", there is consensus on corporate identity of villages in much of South Asia. By contrast, most of the rural settlements in Bangladesh region were neither distinct administrative nor self-sufficient economic units. They were at best social entities. Broadly, the villages are classified by anthropologists into two categories: corporate villages and open villages. A corporate village was a closed organization with some form of collective responsibility. In an open village, there is no joint responsibility; individuals were responsible for their actions. Most villages in Bangladesh region were open whereas the majority of villages in other parts of South Asia including parts of west Bengal were corporate. There are three sets of evidence which suggest that rural settlements in Bangladesh were different not only from those in north India and the Deccan but also from those in much of west Bengal. First, the physical layout of a typical village in Bangladesh region was different from that in west Bengal and north India. The majority of villages in Bangladesh contained linear and dispersed settlements. As a result it is very difficult to define the boundary of such villages. Typical villages in west Bengal and north India were nucleated where houses were concentrated in a well-defined area. Secondly, historical evidence indicates that a typical village in west Bengal was larger and more populous than that in Bangladesh zone. Finally, the census reports during last one hundred years indicate that a village government could be traced in western areas of Bengal whereas it was virtually non-existent in Bangladesh region. Two caveats should, however, be added in this connection. First, the difference between a corporate village and an open village is not always one of kind, but often one of degree. The degree of corporateness varies from village to village. Secondly, all rural settlements in a particular region may not be homogenous. Even within the same region the structure of a few villages may deviate from the general pattern.

A survey of anthropological literature on the determinants of the structure of rural settlements indicates that such determinants may vary not only from region to region but also within a region itself. A small change in the topography may significantly influence the structure of rural settlements. In South Asia, three main compulsions for strong corporate rural settlements could be identified: (i) protection against foreign invaders, (ii) protection against wild animals and, (iii) provision of public services such as irrigation. Bangladesh did not lie athwart the direct routes of foreign invasions. It is not

cost-effective to defend open villages which were predominant in Bangladesh region. Furthermore, foreign invasions in this region were sporadic and less frequent than in north India. Wild animals were not also viewed as serious threats to life and property in this region. Houses are usually built on stilts where wild animals pose a serious threat to human habitation. Historical sources indicate that dwelling houses in Bangladesh region had usually been built on the ground. Finally, the abundance of water in Bangladesh region guaranteed for all practical purposes the independence of the household in respect of water supply. Corporate institutions were needed in much of South Asia for construction, operation and maintenance of communal sources of water supply. Close cooperation was essential not only for running large-scale irrigation systems as envisaged in the Marxian theory but also in operating minor irrigation sources such as village tanks which were extensively used in the Deccan. The economic benefits of corporate institutions in villages of Bangladesh region were, therefore, limited. The village in Bangladesh was primarily a social entity with loosely-structured institutions which lacked collectivist spirit.

The weakness of grass-roots institutions in much of eastern and southern Bengal was at the same time a blessing as well as a handicap. The primacy of the individual in the social life in eastern and southern Bengal promoted robust individualism. This, in turn, enriched cultural life by letting hundred flowers of heresy, heterodoxy and esoterism bloom. Nihar Ranjan Roy rightly underscores the "aversion of the Bengalis for traditional religion" (1400 B.S., p. 712). Northern India which is also referred to as Aryan-Bharatvarsa had been steadfast and firm in its loyalty to rituals, spiritual meditation and social ideals as prescribed by the scriptures of Hinduism. By contrast, Bengal witnessed the emergence of a number of non-vedic cults in open defiance of Brahmanical and Buddhist orthodoxy. These cults not only believed in humanism that placed human beings at the centre of the natural order but also attributed all religious mysteries to human body itself. In Bengal, there were four major forms of mystic Buddhism: *Vajrayana, Shajayana, Kalachakrayana* and *Mantrayana.* These were essentially influenced by tantric practices of yoga school of Hindu philosophy. Bengal played a significant role in disseminating the mystic tantric doctrines. The proponents of these mystic doctrines were known as *Siddas* most of whom are believed to have been born in Bengal. *Nathism* which was a form

of tantric yoga exercised considerable influence in northern and eastern Bengal. The earliest forms of Bengali literature were composed by these mystics in a symbolic language which is known as *"Sandhya-bhasa"* (twilight language). These mystics rebelled not only against traditional beliefs but also against social and caste restrictions. A synthesis of folk cults and religions was practiced by the Bauls of Bengal. The main tenets of all folk religions in Bengal was well-expressed in the following Baul song:

> *"No master I obey, nor injunctions, canons or custom.*
> *Man-made distinctions have no hold on me now*
> *I rejoice in the gladness of the love that*
> *wells out of my own being.*
> *In love there is no separation, but a meeting*
> *of hearts forever". (Sen 1961, p.101)*

The success of Islam in the social environment of eastern and southern Bengal is not, therefore, at all surprising. The weak social institutions can easily account for the preponderance of the Muslims in Lower Bengal. The traditional explanations on Muslim majority in Bengal tend to ignore the institutional uniqueness of Bengal and attribute the unusual success of Islam in eastern and southern Bengal to resentment of the lower castes against the violent oppressions of the upper castes and to intense missionary activities of the Muslim saints and sufis. These traditional explanations cannot, however, satisfactorily explain the unique success of Islam in Bengal. The oppressions of the numerically superior lower castes is not at all unique to Bengal. In fact, such oppressions were more glaring in Bihar and south India. Despite caste inequities, lower castes in other parts of South Asia did not accept Islam. The intensive missionary propaganda of Muslim preachers and saints was not also limited to Bengal; similar missionaries were also active in other parts of South Asia where the hold of Hinduism remained undisturbed. The Islamic proselytization efforts in Bangladesh region succeeded not because the oppressed lower castes were won over by the spiritual powers of the Muslim sufis but because the lower castes in eastern and southern Bengal lived in a loosely-structured society which provided a congenial environment for voluntary conversion. In the rest of South Asia, social and economic controls of corporate villages were so pervasive and effective that individuals, in the face of dire consequences of ostracism, did not dare to challenge the authority of tra-

ditional orthodoxy. Paradoxically, lower castes in Bengal flocked to Islam not because they were oppressed but because the stranglehold of the upper caste in lower Bengal was less complete than in other parts of South Asia where caste oppressions were more rampant. The diffusion of Islam was easier in areas where degree of corporateness of grass-roots institutions was low. There is, therefore, a close correspondence in Bangladesh region between the share of Muslim population and the openness of the villages. An analysis of the rural settlements in Bengal suggests that the degree of corporateness of the rural settlements decreased as one moved from the west to the east in Bengal. The share of Muslim population in Bengal correspondingly increased from the western to eastern areas.

The vigorous individualism in rural settlements of Bengal also found expression in lilting music, tender lyrics and a moving folk literature. From the *charyas* composed during the 9th-12th century to modern Bengali literature, lyrics, which embodied the most sublime feelings of the individuals, constituted the greatest treasure of the Bengali literature. *Sadukti Karnamitra* and *Kabindrabachan-samuchchaya* are the titles of two collections of verses and lyrics which were compiled before the Muslim conquest in the thirteenth century. These compilations illustrate the width, depth, and variety of early Bengali lyrics. Most epics in Bengali literature were translated from alien languages. As Roy rightly remarked, "it appears that the Bengali genius found its expression in lyrics and even now lyrics stir the Bengali hearts. The wide canvas and the deep crosscurrents of the epics is not their cup of tea" (1400 B.S., p. 720). The robust individualism of Bengalis also found expression in folk literature, specially in Mymensingh ballads. As a western expert on folk literature rightly observed: "In these Mymensingh ballads I found an instinct for original thinking, countless instances of individual swaraj and a high value attached to deeds in contrast to passiveness" (Quoted in Shahidullah 1374 B.S., p. 509). The Bengali literature which embodied the joys and sorrows of the Bengalis, became in the eyes of the people, as holy as the Ganges. As a poet in the pre-Muslim Bengal observed, the cultivation of Bengali language was as meritorious as bathing in the Ganges because the Bengali language was as full, deep, meaningful, suggestive and beauteous as the Ganges itself (Roy 1400 B.S., p. 552).

Individualism of the Bengalis also shaped architecture, sculpture and painting in the region. Compared to the temples and viharas in

other parts of South Asia, temples in Bengal were generally small and constricted. Bengal did not produce such massive and towering structures as the Bhuvaneshwar, Khajuraho or the temple-cities in the Deccan. The canvas of the Bengali painting was narrow. There was no Ajanta, or Ellora here. Bengal lacked massive sculptures like the Buddha statue in Saranath, the sculptures of Udayagiri, Elephanta and Ellora and Nataraj icons in the Deccan. The paintings in Bengal focussed on isolated and fragmentary pictures of life. The deeply-ingrained individualism denied width to the works of art and architecture in Bengal, but it imparted intensity and depth to works of the Bengalis (Roy 1400 B.S., pp 719-720).

The uniqueness of social institutions in Bengal also contributed to the development of a new school of family law. Law of inheritance in Bengal is prescribed by the *Dayabhaga* school whereas it is governed by *Mitakshara* in the rest of north India. Because of high level of individualism in Bengal society, women were given higher status in *Dayabhag* law than in the other systems of inheritance law. *Dayabhaga* recognized the right of a widow to enjoy the properties left by her husband. In other systems of Hindu law, no official right of inheritance of women was recognized.(Rahman 1994, p. 118). The *Mitakshara* system of law considered all property as family property and conferred on sons and grandsons the right in the family property even before the death of the owner. Owing to high degree of individualism in Bengal, *Dayabhaga* school maintains that sons have right over the property on the death of their father.

The weakness of grass-roots institutions and the consequential primacy of individuals was not, however, an unmixed blessing. It undermined her political development. In the jargon of public choice literature, political life in Bangladesh region was characterized by "isolation paradox". Public choice theory assumes that the nature and effectiveness of political, social and economic institutions depend on their benefits and costs. Institutions are shaped by contractual arrangements among individuals for provision of public goods and for minimization of harmful effects of externalities. Such contractual arrangements succeed where a social contract is economically profitable. Isolation paradox arises in exceptional cases where individuals act to the detriment of each other though the social costs of such actions are much higher than the sum of benefits received by individuals themselves. This paradox is likely to occur where according to the perception of the participants the enforcement costs of

a social contract are high and free-riding, in the sense of availing of the benefits, without paying the concomitant costs, is easy. In such an environment, each participant pursues a strictly dominant strategy and does not make any compromise for the welfare of the society as a whole (Sen 1967).

Because of the existence of isolation paradox, grass-roots institutions in Bangladesh region were weak. This, in turn, impeded the development of viable political institutions. As a survey of the political evolution in Bengal in Chapter 3 suggests, political institutions in Bangladesh region were small, short-lived and highly unstable. These may be described as "contractual states". Despite repeated failures of contractual states, the Bengalis in the pre-Muslim period could not avert frequent political anarchy and establish sustainable political entity embracing the entire territorial unit. The Muslim rulers of Delhi ultimately fashioned predatory states from above. As suggested in Chapter 3, the Muslim rulers in Delhi succeeded in unifying Bengal, thanks to better means of transport and improved weapons. However, the establishment of a predatory state could not eliminate political instability in the region. The predatory states in Muslim Bengal did not derive their strength from within the region itself, their survival depended on the strength of Delhi-based empires. The emergence of a predatory state in Bengal had two harmful effects on her polity. First, in the absence of corporate institutions at the village level, the Muslim rulers in Bengal had to depend on local intermediaries for collection of revenue and maintenance of law and order. Unlike the feudal lords in Europe, the intermediaries in Muslim Bengal had no hereditary rights. They could at any time be replaced by a local competitor. Every intermediary therefore, tried to eliminate the potential rivals so that they remain indispensable for revenue collection in the locality. This struggle for survival of Hindu intermediaries generated relentless factionalism which is known in Bengal as *daladali* (Basu 1956). Subsequent political changes could not eliminate the vicious effects of factionalism in social life in both rural and urban areas. The tastes of the Bengali elites for factionalism in the first part of this century were described by Nirad C. Chaudhuri in the following manner: "The Bengalis, and more specially the Bengalis of Calcutta, were and still remain, some of the finest virtuoso of factiousness. There is hardly any branch of it which they do not practice, and hardly any activity into which it has not wormed its way... The latest

consequence of this factiousness, now that political power has come into the hands of these clique-ridden creatures is going to be chronic political instability. The stasis of Plato and the *asabiya* of Ibn Khaldun were as milk and water compared with this distilled spirit of factiousness" (1988, p. 401).

Secondly, the intermediaries in Bengal were loyal neither to their masters nor to their constituents. Because of the temporary nature of their assignment, the intermediaries in Bengal tried to exact as much rent as possible in the shortest possible time. Rent-seeking, therefore, became the hallmark of administration in Bengal. As the sixteenth century poet Mukundaram lamented: "The revenue collector (sarkar) has become a curse; he wrongly records uncultivated land as cultivated and takes *dhuti* (as bribe) without doing any favour" (Quoted in Shahidullah 1374 B.S., p. 392). It is usually assumed that the introduction of western practices by the British in administration necessitated the growth of intermediaries who mediated between the foreign rulers and unlettered masses. In the traditional historical literature, these intermediaries are usually blamed for introduction of corrupt practices. In fact neither intermediaries nor corrupt practices were created by the innovations introduced by the British; they existed long before the establishment of the Raj.

Historical evidence presented in this study partly supports the primordial interpretation of nationalism in Bangladesh. Obviously Bangladesh was not a distinct geographical, historical or linguistic unit. Nevertheless the uniqueness of her grass-roots institutions set Bangladesh apart from the rest of South Asian sub-continent. Her political experience and religious evolution differed significantly from the rest of South Asia. The distinct identity of Bangladesh region, however, lay dormant for a long time. Paradoxically, the very forces which silently moulded her identity delayed its public expression. The robust individualism which characterized Bangladesh region impeded the development of collective institutions which are essential for nourishing collective consciousness. Bangladesh region was different from the rest of South Asia because political institutions in this region were weak. The primacy of the individual in the social life precluded the development of a regional identity. Consequently, nationalism in this region did not surface at all till manipulations of the elites forced its articulation through a tortuous process. History, therefore, does not fully vindicate the primordial interpretation of nationalism in Bangladesh.

The search for identity in Bangladesh region did not spring automatically from within her society. It was triggered by twin shocks of political and spiritual invasions by Muslim rulers and Islam. All ancient civilizations which experienced significant conversions to Islam faced a conflict of loyalties, between the indigenous culture and the new faith. Bangladesh region was not an exception to this. Literary evidence indicates the existence of a dichotomy of faith and the habitat in the Bengali Muslim mind since the fourteenth century. These inner conflicts were mirrored in the writings of medieval poets like Shah Md. Saghir, Muzammil, Syed Sultan, Abdul Hakim and a host of Muslim poets. This duality of the mind of the Bengali Muslims was initially confined to cultural sphere. The inner conflicts of Bengal Muslims did not surface in the political arena till the advent of the British Raj. Economic and political polarization in the pre-British Bengal could not take place along communal lines. Local Muslim converts as well as lower caste Hindus were exploited by a coalition of immigrant Muslims and upper caste Hindus. The British rulers by replacing the Muslim exploiters united locally converted and immigrant Muslims. The identity crisis was further sharpened by the manipulation of the middle classes which emerged during the British rule. As discussed in Chapter 5, the identity of Bengal Muslims was ultimately defined through a process of tri-partite conflict between the Hindu *bhadralok*, immigrant Muslim *ashraf* and vernacular Muslim elite which mainly consisted of the educated jotedars. The manipulations by the elites of this duality in Muslim mind resulted in tortuous twists and turns in Bangladesh's quest for national identity. However, the dichotomy of territorial and extra-territorial loyalties in the Bengali Muslims was not invented by the middle classes, it existed long before the middle classes came into being. Bangladesh was, therefore, shaped by a blend of primordial and instrumental factors.

The relative strength of natural (primordial) and man-made (instrumental) factors, is not, however, the main issue of debate on Bangladesh nationalism today. The most contentious debate concerns the competing dogmas of "Bengali" and "Bangladeshi" nationalism. Literally, "Bengali nationalism" is a linguistic nationalism that assumes the Bengali language as the basis of nationhood in Bangladesh. On the face of it, "Bangladeshi nationalism" is presented as a territorial nationalism in contrast to "Bengali nationalism" which is construed as supra-nationalism that aims to unite the Bengali

speaking people in India and Bangladesh. In fact, there has been as yet no serious conflict between territorial and linguistic nationalism in Bangladesh. In reality, "Bangladeshi" nationalism is not territorial nationalism. The present boundaries of Bangladesh were drawn in pursuance of the two-nation theory. "Bangladeshi nationalism" which considers East Pakistan as the direct precursor of Bangladesh is, therefore, a form of religious nationalism that underscores the Muslim preponderance in the country (Umar 1987). Viewed in this context Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalisms are not two distinct nationalisms, they are two different strands of a complex and multidimensional nationhood. Nationalism in Bangladesh was shaped by an interplay of faith and habitat, religion and language and extra-territorial and territorial loyalties. Both linguistic and religious strands constitute inseparable ingredients of nationalism in Bangladesh. For the historians, the dichotomy between "Bengali" and "Bangladeshi" nationalism is, therefore, unreal. Both the strands were woven into the warp and woof of nationhood in Bangladesh.

While the historians can ignore the controversy on the "Bengali" versus "Bangladeshi" nationalism, politicians cannot. If Islam is considered as an essential component of Bangladeshi nationalism, the role of the minority community in the political life of Bangladesh needs to be delineated. Bangladesh contains more than 14.5 million Hindus and 1.4 million Buddhists and Christians. Total Hindu population in Bangladesh exceeds the population of Muslim majority countries like Yemen Republic, Jordan, Tajikistan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Oman etc. Politicians in Bangladesh must, therefore, come to grips with this inescapable reality. The doctrines of "Bengali" and "Bangladeshi" nationalism (in its territorial version) seek to deny this problem by eliminating altogether the role of Islam in the political evolution in this region. This approach is not, however, supported by history.

Despite the tension of territorial and religious loyalties among the Muslims of Bengal, Hindu-Muslim relations during more than five hundred years of Muslim rule were characterized by peaceful coexistence of religious communities. In the absence of strong corporate institutions, the Bengali Hindus had been accustomed to heresy and heterodoxy. Because of deeply-ingrained individualism, the Bengalis had respect for each other's religious views. Like the Muslims, the Hindus in Bangladesh region also had an aversion for orthodox Brahminism and caste rigidities. Both the communities were deeply

imbued by humanism and spirit of tolerance. Their attitude towards life evolved in the same social and political environment. They were highly individualistic and emotional. Despite the difference in religion, there was enough commonness to unite the Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh region. Prior to the establishment of the British Raj, there was, therefore, no obstacle to Hindu-Muslim cooperation. The two communities fell apart during the British rule because of the manipulations of the elites. The birth of Pakistan in 1947 represented the triumph of these divisive forces. The victory of fundamentalist forces ultimately turned out to be an aberration. Both the religious communities came closer to each other in the wake of the language movement. Through democratic process, the Muslims in Bangladesh repeatedly disowned the fundamentalist demand for a theocratic state. The Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh were inspired not only by the memory of a common past but also by a dream for the future (Roy 1987).

A historian is often described as a "Prophet in Reverse". It is very difficult to resist the temptation of extrapolating from the past to the future. Historians are wary of the dangers of such extrapolations which may underestimate the probability of the unexpected. Nevertheless, some of the trends of the society in the region had been in operation for a long time. It will, therefore, be unwise to overlook these trends in formulating policies for the future.

One of the recurrent themes of this study is that grass-roots institutions in Bangladesh region had been historically weak. This implies that local governments in this region were never well-organized. The same trend continues today. As a recent UNDP Report on Public Administration Sector Study in Bangladesh rightly points out, "...the real challenges in establishing an appropriate local government system in Bangladesh, as envisaged in the Constitution (Articles 59 & 60) arises from lack of adequate pressures from the local people and their institution and delay from administrative and political leadership to encourage the development of a locally based political process by sharing power, responsibility and authority with elected local government bodies. People and institutions at the local level are not well-organized for local level actions due to various reasons" (1993, p. 47).

Ever since the enactment of the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act of 1870, the successive governments have tried to establish village governments in this region. These policy-makers failed to appreciate

the fact that unlike in other parts of South Asia, corporate villages did not exist in much of the open villages in Bangladesh region. The attempt to establish local government in rural Bangladesh does not mean a return to the past; it involves creation of new institutions which did not exist at all. What Thompson, a British administrator in Bengal, observed in 1923 is also valid for Bangladesh today: "The absence village... means the absence of the germs of corporate life. To develop any form of local government in rural areas, something more is necessary than to stimulate village organizations already in existence and endow village officials with increased powers. A local Authority has to be constructed where nothing of the sort existed before and, what is a matter of great difficulty a sense of public duty, a will to subordinate private wishes to official advantage, has to be grafted, where it is in a wide sense a novelty" (1923, p. 126).

Despite experiments during last 125 years, local governments in rural Bangladesh have not succeeded in striking roots. Functionally moribund, financially bankrupt and centrally controlled, local governments in Bangladesh are not grass-roots peoples' organizations; they are just command performances. One of the reasons for the failure of such institutions in rural Bangladesh may be its size. An average union—the lowest tier of local government, contains more than twenty seven thousand people. It is extremely difficult to establish corporate institutions for such a large group. The policy-makers in countries like Bangladesh where historically local institutions were weak and ineffective should pay heed to the advice given by the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume: "Two neighbors may agree to drain a meadow, which they possess in common; because it is easy for them to know each others mind, and each must perceive, that the immediate consequence of his failing in his part, is the abandoning the whole project. But it is very difficult, and indeed impossible, that a thousand persons should agree in such action; it being difficult for them to concert so complicated a design and still more difficult for them to execute it, while each seeks a pretext to free himself of the trouble and expense, and wou'd lay the whole burden on others. Political society easily remedies both these inconveniences" (Quoted in Wade 1985, p. 15). Bangladesh experienced dysfunction not only of large local governments but also of cooperative organizations. For a long time Bangladesh experimented with union multipurpose cooperative societies which recruited members from 10 to 15 villages with a population of ten to fifteen thousand

people. These organizations signally failed for two reasons. First, group cohesion in such societies was very weak. "There was little relationship among the membership itself, it was too scattered. There was no social cohesion, no solidarity". Secondly, large organizations like union multipurpose cooperative societies were based on the assumption of social harmony among various groups with different purposes. However, the rural economy in Bangladesh is characterized by "chaotic economic conflict" (Khan 1983, Vol. II).

In sharp contrast to failure of large organizations in Bangladesh, small peoples' organizations have demonstrated enormous potentialities. The Grameen Bank which is built on the nucleus of small groups at the grass-roots have attained significant success in mobilizing the rural poor. As a World Bank report rightly observed, "What has been difficult to accomplish for several decades with the support of governments and various bilateral and multilateral agencies has been accomplished by Grameen Bank in a decade" (Khandkar, Khalily and Khan 1994, pp. 15-16). The success of Grameen Bank is clearly attributable to a better appreciation of the dynamics of Bangladesh society compared to all other official programmes. The experience of Grameen Bank and other NGOs in Bangladesh clearly suggests that the establishment of new and small grass-roots institutions is the key to building of sustainable organizations in Bangladesh.

A survey of the political evolution of Bangladesh region indicates that because of institutional vacuum at the grass-roots, polity in this region was corroded by intermediaries, rent-seeking, factionalism and political instability. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, these destructive forces were interrelated and mutually-reinforcing. They are likely to destabilize her political life until countervailing forces of local governments, peoples' organizations and civic groups make their presence felt. A question, therefore, arises whether the same historical forces will repeat themselves in the future. There are three distinct possibilities. First, one may agree with the optimistic public choice literature that suggests that people learn from the mistakes of their non-cooperation. According to North (1990), there are three essential conditions for sustainable cooperation: (1) individuals repeatedly interact, (2) they have a great deal of information about each other and (3) the number of individuals involved is small. While the first two conditions could be easily fulfilled, it is doubtful whether small cohesive groups will be formed automatically. As the

Grameen Bank experience shows, the initiative to set up small groups may have to come from outside. The second possibility is that the compulsions for cooperation may change in the future. With the highest density of population (excluding city states) in the world and the silent pressures of globalization, collective organizations may emerge gradually to counteract the institutional vacuum. Finally, the people in Bangladesh may not learn anything from past. Those who do not learn from history are condemned to live with it.

About two hundred years after the French Revolution the great revolutionary Zhou-En-lai was asked to comment about the significance of the Revolution. He is reported to have answered, "it is too soon to tell" (Schama 1989). Obviously twenty five years is too short a span of time to assess the significance of the Bangladesh Revolution which was at the same time a social and nationalist revolution. As a social revolution, the great dream of a socialist transformation in a People's Republic has already been rudely shattered by the collapse of the command economies throughout the world. This has not, however, solved the demands for social justice, equity and human dignity. The possibility of new challenges to social equilibrium in Bangladesh cannot, therefore, be ruled out.

As a nationalist revolution, the significance of Bangladesh revolution has been interpreted in various ways. Lawrence Ziring described Bangladesh as an "anachronism within anachronism" which are just reactions to past mistakes and warned that the real Bangladesh is yet to emerge (1992, p. 216). These worries are not, however, justified. Bengali irredentism is not a potent force as yet. Another author argues that "the birth of Bangladesh is in many ways a unique phenomenon and poses a number of interesting questions to students of political development" (Jahan 1994, p. 203). The birth of Bangladesh has raised fundamental questions about the concept of nationhood in South Asian subcontinent. The emergence of Bangladesh reveals that South Asia does not contain one or two nations but many nations. Bangladesh may not, therefore, be the last hidden nation to surface in this subcontinent. The relationship between the "parts" and "whole" in South Asia may not be a settled issue, their respective roles may have to be renegotiated in the future.

In a sense, the birth of Bangladesh represents the end of nationalistic phase of her history. This has ushered in the more difficult phase of institution-building. The energetic individualism that characterized historically the people in this region had nurtured a social

milieu which was antagonistic to institutional development. The real challenge before the people of Bangladesh today was well expressed in a verse attributed to the fifteenth century poet Chandidas:

"Garon Bhangite Pare Achhe Kato Khal
Bhangiya Gorite Pare Je Jon Biral"

(There are many knaves who can destroy a structure. Rare indeed is the person who can rebuild on the ruins) (Quoted in Bose 1986, p. 1)

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Postscript

This monograph is an ambitious attempt to analyse the entire history of an ancient land within a rigorous conceptual framework. An inherent weakness of such sweeping presentation is that it tends to neglect details. On the contrary, too much details distract the attention of readers from the main themes of the study. In retrospect, it appears that terse presentation in this book has led in some places to misreadings, and doubts. This postscript addresses some of the questions raised by the readers and reviewers since the publication of this monograph in 1996.

One of the main themes of the book is that villages in much of South Asia were typically "corporate" whereas most rural settlements in the Bangladesh region were "open". Three questions have been raised about this hypothesis.

First, it has been argued that the differences between typical villages in Bangladesh and those in the rest of the subcontinent have been overstated in this study. Since the concept of self-sufficient village community has been debunked in recent anthropological studies, the proponents of this view maintain that the villages in the rest of the South Asia, which are not homogeneous, cannot be clearly differentiated from those of the Bangladesh region. This study also concluded that the so-called village communities were exceptional and existed only in certain parts of north and south India. This is why, the paradigm of 'corporate' and 'open' village was used in this study in place of "self-sufficient village community". It was assumed that the exceptional village community was the purest form of corporate village. However, "corporateness" and "openness" are qualitative concepts. It will be unrealistic to postulate that all corporate villages are alike. Even the exceptional village communities were not homogenous; they were subdivided into *raiyatwari*, *pattidari*, and *bhaiachara* villages. The degree of corporateness, therefore, varied among corporate villages. This does

not necessarily mean that all villages which did not correspond to the ideal of a typical village community was not at all a corporate village. For example, a reviewer observed, "it follows that in other parts of north and south India a certain lack of corporateness (and hence the possibility of open village) was not to be ruled out. Lack of corporateness, therefore cannot be seen as an exclusive proposition for Bengal, or for that matter eastern Bengal" (Sen 2000, p. 144). Such observations are based on a total misunderstanding of the methodology of this study. Following Max Weber, the concepts of "corporate" and "open" villages are used as ideal types (see p.44). The ideal types may not always exist in pure form. It was concluded that most villages in Bangladesh corresponded to the ideal of "open village", though the degree of corporateness in "corporate villages" in the rest of South Asia varied. These differences may not be evident to outsiders and may not be always measured in quantitative terms. They, however, could be easily perceived by the administrators who governed those villages, anthropologists who lived in those villages, and social scientists employing Max Weber's methodology including *Verstehen*.

Secondly, it has been contended that this study ignores important regional variations among the villages in areas that now constitute Bangladesh. Obviously, there were regional variations among such villages in respect of tenurial relations or agricultural practices etc. However, the most significant proxy for the corporateness of a village is its physical layout. The overwhelming majority of villages in Bangladesh were linear and dispersed settlements except small pockets in Barind area in Nawabganj and Natore districts (Baqui, 1998). Thus the regional variations among the villages in respect of land tenure etc. are irrelevant for the main themes of this study.

Finally, it has been argued that the differences between the villages in West Bengal and Bangladesh region are fuzzy because both the regions contained a mixture of nucleated and linear-dispersed settlements. It is true that all villages in West Bengal region were not nucleated. However, the reports of the early British administrators, Settlement reports and anthropological studies clearly suggest that most of villages in Bangladesh region were linear and dispersed whereas the share of nucleated villages in West Bengal was high. These are however, generalizations based on statistical behaviour which may not be valid in all cases.

A lot of questions have been raised about the role of village officials in the Bangladesh region. At page 40, it was stated: "The system of employing village officials did not exist at all in the region. The posts of Patwari or village accountant are unknown here". The term village officials in this para refers to officials employed by the village and not officials stationed at the village by outside authority. The institution of village accountant in Bangladesh did not exist in this traditional sense, though there were obviously accountants who kept records of revenue. They were not, however, employees of village. In ancient Bengal, the functions of the village accountant were performed by the office of Pustapala which consisted of two or three officials who were appointed by the State (Roy, 1400 B.S., p. 324). However, in some large villages, revenue records were maintained by an official designated as Patradasa (Roy, 1400 B.S., p. 325). It is not, however, clear as to who appointed and paid the Patradasa and what was the relationship of Patradasa and Pustapala. The epigraphic evidence clearly suggests that the office of Patradasa was confined to large villages only. Furthermore, the office of Pustapla which employed more than one official served a number of villages rather than a single village. Obviously, the Pustapala was not a village official in the traditional sense. As the overwhelming majority of villages in the Bangladesh region is small, it is very likely that in the ancient period Pustapala acting on behalf of the central government maintained revenue records in the Bangladesh region.

The office of village accountant was designated as Patwari during the Muslim rule. However, the role of Patwari varied according to tenurial relations. Broadly speaking, there were two types of villages in South Asia: peasant-held (raiyati) village and zamindar-held (taaluqa) village. In the raiyati villages, the Patwari as an employee of the village used to protect the rights of the villagers. In zamindari villages, the village accountant or Patwari was a creature of landlord; in most cases paid by him and invariably controlled by him. In many zamindari villages, the functions of the Patwari were appropriated by the gomastas (employees of the zamindars). In many villages in Bangladesh region, the Patwaris or village accountants were outsiders and often they maintained accounts of more than one village. The uniqueness of the institution of village accountant in Lower Bengal became evident when the British rulers undertook the

experiment of introducing the Qanungo and Patwari sytem by Regulation XII of 1817. In a letter of the Board of Revenue dated 2nd June, 1819, it was observed that the Governor General-in-Council is "sensible of the difficulties which are likely to attend the introduction of the Regulation in Bengal compared with the provinces in which the village communities are entire" (GOB, 1817-19, pp. 165-166). It clearly indicates that as early as 1819, the Government of India noted the fact that the institution of Patwari in the traditional form did not function in Bangladesh region where the village community in its "entire form" did not exist. Furthermore, R. Chamberlain in his report dated 18th April, 1819 stated as follows on the Patwari system: "In the western provinces including Benaras and Behar, the expenses of the Patwaree more generally falls on the Ryots ... In Bengal or in those Districts in which I have had opportunities of making enquiry the Patwaree appeared to be paid by the landholders almost generally"(GOB, 1817-19, pp. 114-115). Incidentally, it may be noted here that a reviewer using the same records tried to argue that the Patwari in the traditional sense existed in Bangladesh region (Sen, 2000, pp. 146-150). This analysis, however, suffers from two major weaknesses. First, the reports of Bihar region (which were sent by the Government of Bengal to Collector of Mymensingh) were confused as records originating in Bangladesh region. Secondly, the paragraphs which dealt with the uniqueness of the Patwari in Bangladesh region were altogether ignored. However, two conclusions seem to be inescapable from an analysis of these records of early British administrators. First, the institution of Patwari was stronger in Bihar and western provinces where corporate villages existed compared to village accountants in Lower Bengal. Secondly, the village accountant in Lower Bengal was generally (except small exceptions) paid by the Zamindars whereas the Patwari in other areas was paid by the villagers themselves.

A question has been raised whether the description of the British administrators about the revenue administration in Bangladesh region is valid about the realities in Pre-British Bengal. A recent study has contended that the village in Pre-British Bengal "was not simply an administrative tier but constituted instead a distinct level of polity counterpoised to the level of zamindari authority, ... the village was not only the basic unit of revenue-payment, but it was

also the basic unit of revenue -assessment" (Rahman, 1986, p. 82). There are several major weaknesses of this hypothesis.

The proponents of this hypothesis do not furnish any documentary evidence that land revenue in the Bangladesh region was generally paid by the village as a corporate entity. Their conclusion is based on indirect evidence. From an analysis of the villages in the rest of South Asia, two characteristics of villages responsible for revenue payment could be identified. First, the villages which acted as the basic unit of revenue payment had a "financial pool into which everybody paid and from which the village representatives satisfied the revenue demand". (Habib, 1985 p. 135). Available evidence does not support the existence of such financial pools in Bangladesh villages. Secondly, there used to be clearly identifiable persons who were responsible for the collection of revenue. In north Indian villages, such persons were criminally prosecuted if they failed to collect revenue (Habib, 1985, p. 313). No such system is reported to have existed in the Bangladesh region. Furthermore, the revenue collectors in the village whether a headman or a Chaudhury were traditionally entitled to a share of the revenue or to a degree of revenue exemption. However, no such system was clearly established in Bengal.

The zamindari system was firmly entrenched in Bengal long before the establishment of the British rule in 1757. It is, therefore, difficult to understand as to why there would be radical change in the process of assessment and collection of revenue from the cultivators in the early years of the British rule. Apriori, it seems that it would be more profitable for the zamindars to keep the power of assessment to themselves rather than sharing this power with the villagers. According to Habib (1985, p. 156), a zamindar in Bengal used to pay fixed rent to the King whereas he used to fix the rent of the cultivators except where revenue was fixed by custom. An analysis of the available evidence does not support the hypothesis that the village was the normal unit of revenue assessment. However, in sparsely populated areas or difficult terrains, it may be cost-effective to share revenue assessment with the villagers. But such instances are likely to be exceptions and not the general rule. In this connection, Paterson's preliminary report of Baldakhal Pargana in Comilla deserves special mention. Paterson wrote in 1887: "The Board may judge from the circumstances what a seem (seam?) of

confusion this country exhibits: The Pottahs which are granted to the Rieots in Buldacaul are nothing more than a Declaration in General terms under the seal of the Zamindar or Amil of the Rate of Assessment per Cunnie according to the quantity of land that the Rieots may be afterward capable of cultivating without expressing the quantity which the Ruitt undertakes to occupy or the amount for which he is answerable. One of these Pottas often serves a whole village but a Ruitt of (if ?) he chuses may have a separate pottah for himself which only differs from the other being addressed to him" (Islam, 2000, p. 218). Paterson's report clearly suggests that in Baldakhal Pargana of Comilla district the cultivators could opt to pay the revenue individually or jointly. Furthermore, the rate of assessment per acre was fixed by the revenue officials. Thus the problem of apportioning the demand on the whole village among the cultivators did not at all rise. The villages described by Paterson are a far cry from corporate entities.

The relationship between grass-roots institutions and Islamic proselytization as enunciated in Chapter IV has also been misunderstood. For example, a reviewer observed: "It is strongly asserted by the author that the easy spread of Islam in Bengal was mainly due to the absence of strong grass-root institutions. He argues, that the spread of Islam in other parts of South Asia was limited because of the presence of the strong village community. But does it mean that Pakistan where Islam spread well too lacked strong village community?" (Islam, 1997, p. 339). This is, however, a wrong interpretation of this monograph's explanation about the relative success of Islam in Bengal. According to this study, there were two types of conversion to Islam in South Asia: (1) conversion from below, and (2) conversion from above. Conversion from below was possible where grass-roots institutions were weak. In areas with strong corporate institutions, the initiative for conversion came from above. It was clearly stated at page 112 that conversion from above may be initiated by a King or leadership of a tribe, caste group, professional guild or village community. However, in most cases corporate village leadership was actively opposed to conversion to an alien faith. The explanation for Muslim preponderance in areas which now constitute Pakistan was, therefore, explained in this study in the following manner : "Obviously in the Punjab, Sind and NWFP there were strong tribal organizations among the Muslims. It is,

therefore, likely that many of such tribes had group conversions to Islam" (see p. 112).

Questions have also been raised about the relationship of the main themes of this study and the burgeoning "social capital" literature. Though the term "social capital" was coined as early as 1916 and was conceptualized in the 1970s and the 1980s by economist Glen Loury and sociologists Evan Light and James Coleman (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 19), it was really popularized in the 1990s by Robert Putnam and his colleagues. The term social capital was defined by Putnam in the following manner: "Social Capital ... refers to features of social organization such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam, 1993). According to Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital can be defined simply as a part of informal rules or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them" (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 16).

Though the term "social capital" was not explicitly used in this study and the underlying theory of "*Discovery of Bangladesh*" was developed totally independent of social capital theory, the theoretical underpinnings of social capital theory and the present study are derived from the same economic literature. In fact, there is striking similarity between the themes of Putnam's "*Making Democracy Work*" and "*Discovery of Bangladesh*". It was postulated in this study that despite ethnic, linguistic and cultural unity in Greater Bengal, historical developments in eastern and western regions in Bengal diverged significantly owing to differences in institutions at the grass-roots level. It was argued that rural settlements in Eastern Bengal were characterized by "isolation paradox" which impeded spontaneous cooperation at the lowest level. Putnam also showed that historical evolution in north and south Italy followed different paths owing to the fact that the tradition of civic community was conspicuously missing in South Italy whereas North Italy had historically vibrant grass-roots institutions.

Despite these similarities between "*Making Democracy Work*" and "*Discovery of Bangladesh*", there are significant differences in their methodology and assumptions. In one sense, the methodology of *Discovery of Bangladesh* is narrower than Putnam's analysis. The "isolation paradox" in *Discovery of Bangladesh* is strictly confined to economic behaviour of rational individuals whereas the concept of

social capital encompasses not only economic costs and benefits but also social norms and mores. In another sense, the methodology of *Discovery of Bangladesh* is broader than that of Putnam because it tried to identify the linkages between micro and macro institutions in Bangladesh (see chapter 3). No such attempt was made by Putnam. The studies also differ in their explanation as to why corporate social institutions at grass-roots level do not grow in certain regions. Putnam argues that civic institutions in South Italy were destroyed by the Norman autocracy. On the contrary, *Discovery of Bangladesh* argues that corporate villages are not necessarily antagonistic to imperial exploitation; in many cases corporate villages were promoted by imperial rulers themselves. For example, in Russia the "mir" (village community) was promoted by the czars for convenience of taxation and preservation of serfdom. *Discovery of Bangladesh* explained how the costs of cooperation at the grass-roots level were higher than its benefits. Such an analysis is missing in Putnam. In retrospect, it appears that, "social capital" theory is not needed to explain the historical evolution of Bangladesh region. However, the significance of Bangladesh's historical evolution for future political and economic development as sketched at pages 153 to 157 in *Discovery of Bangladesh* could be better explained in terms of social capital theory. The inescapable conclusion of this study is that there is an acute dearth of social capital in the rural settlements of the Bangladesh region. This proposition was, however, challenged by a reviewer on the ground that "people's self-development plays a critical risk-insurance role in terms of crisis" (Sen, 2000, p. 152). Unfortunately, in case of Bangladesh even major crises like imminent threats of breach in flood embankments fail to elicit such expected cooperative response. A Chinese proverb rightly says," Dykes are useless without people to attend to them". In China, millions of people are mobilized to protect flood embankments. In contrast, local people in villages in Bangladesh are utterly indifferent to the urgency of maintaining earthen embankments in times of flood. The experience of repeated breaches in the embankment of the Gumti river during last two hundred years is a case in point.

It appears that the earthen embankment on the Gumti river at Comilla was in existence when the East India Company conquered Bengal. In 1770s when the embankment was breached, it was repaired at the cost of the East India Company and the embankment

had to be protected often by the Company's soldiers. There is no evidence of people's participation in such efforts (Islam, 2000) Richard Carstairs, an Indian civilian joined Comilla district administration in 1874. He left the following vivid description of Gumti flood in 1874.

"In connection with water there is also the question of floods. The river Goomtee which flowed past Comilla was confined between two embankments of such a height that when they were full to the brim the river was some eight feet above the level of the town. The embankments were a great anxiety to us, for the Rajah was supposed to keep them up, and, being neglected, they were full of rat-holes. When leaks developed, we had the utmost difficulty in getting men to work at stopping them. The population seemed to be divided into two classes - those whose caste forbade them to labour with the hands at all, and those whose honour forbade them to work save in their own fields. It was a degradation to such a man to work as a coolie. I remember one whose house stood below the leak, and would have been swept away had the embankment burst, and who yet utterly refused to do a hand's turn to save the embankment.

"It is not my business", he said, "but that of the Government (by the way it was not the Government's business, but the Rajah's)" and they must keep it up - I won't".

I went out to help at the leak about the time this was said. The river was almost lipping the bank. A rat-hole had scoured, and the whole bank was a mass of soft mud held together by a skin of turf. We took a bamboo and thrust it by the mere pressure of our hands twelve feet down into the mud. The public works sergeant was seated on a box, utterly done - not able to speak above a whisper, for his voice was gone with much shouting; and in this land swarming with sturdy peasants, the only labour we could get to work at the leak was that of the prisoners from the jail" (Carstairs, 1912, p. 39).

About seventy five years later, a similar description of Gumti flood was recorded by Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan:

"We motored ten miles on the high embankment of the angry river whose muddy current swirled powerfully but noiselessly. On our right the paddy fields were at least fifteen to twenty feet below the top level of the river. Frequently, we stopped to examine a "Ghogh" i.e. a place where water was seeping or oozing. These were the danger points...

Some of the ghoghs were enlarging at an alarming pace while others had already been plugged. The river was being held, though precariously. It had not breached anywhere as yet. Life in the adjoining village seemed to proceed normally. The dangerous wall of water which hung over their head evidently did not worry the stoical villagers. Children and even grown ups were making a holiday, fishing and bathing merrily. They gathered in knots where the engineers jeep stopped on the banks. They watched the ghoghs which frightened us so much with obvious unconcern. They would not volunteer to help in finding out the under water seepage holes.

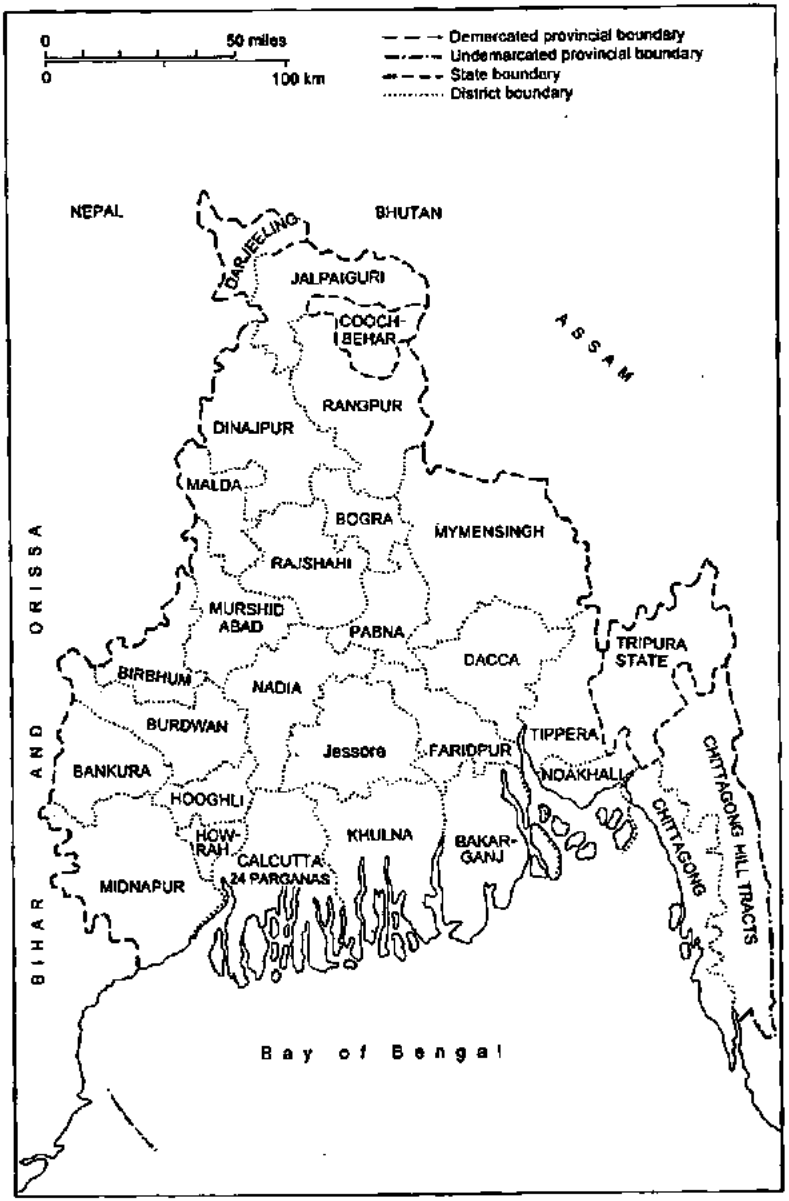
"Do you not realize". I asked a group "that if a breach takes place here you will be completely ruined? Then why don't you come forward to prevent it?

I did not get an answer from them. Why are they not anxious. I do not know and yet I cannot say that their attitude is foolish. Perhaps there is a deep wisdom in it". (Khan, 1983, Vol. I, pp. 341-342)

About fifty years have elapsed since Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan recorded the above impressions. However, the situation remains unchanged and local people do not as yet participate in the protection of embankments. In times of emergency, Gumti embankments are protected by the army or government appointed contractors. A society which remains so inactive and stoical in the face of impending breach of embankment at their doorsteps is pathologically lacking in social capital. Indeed in such a society "Defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorders, and stagnation intensify one another in a suffocating misama of vicious circles" (Putnam, 1993, p. 177).

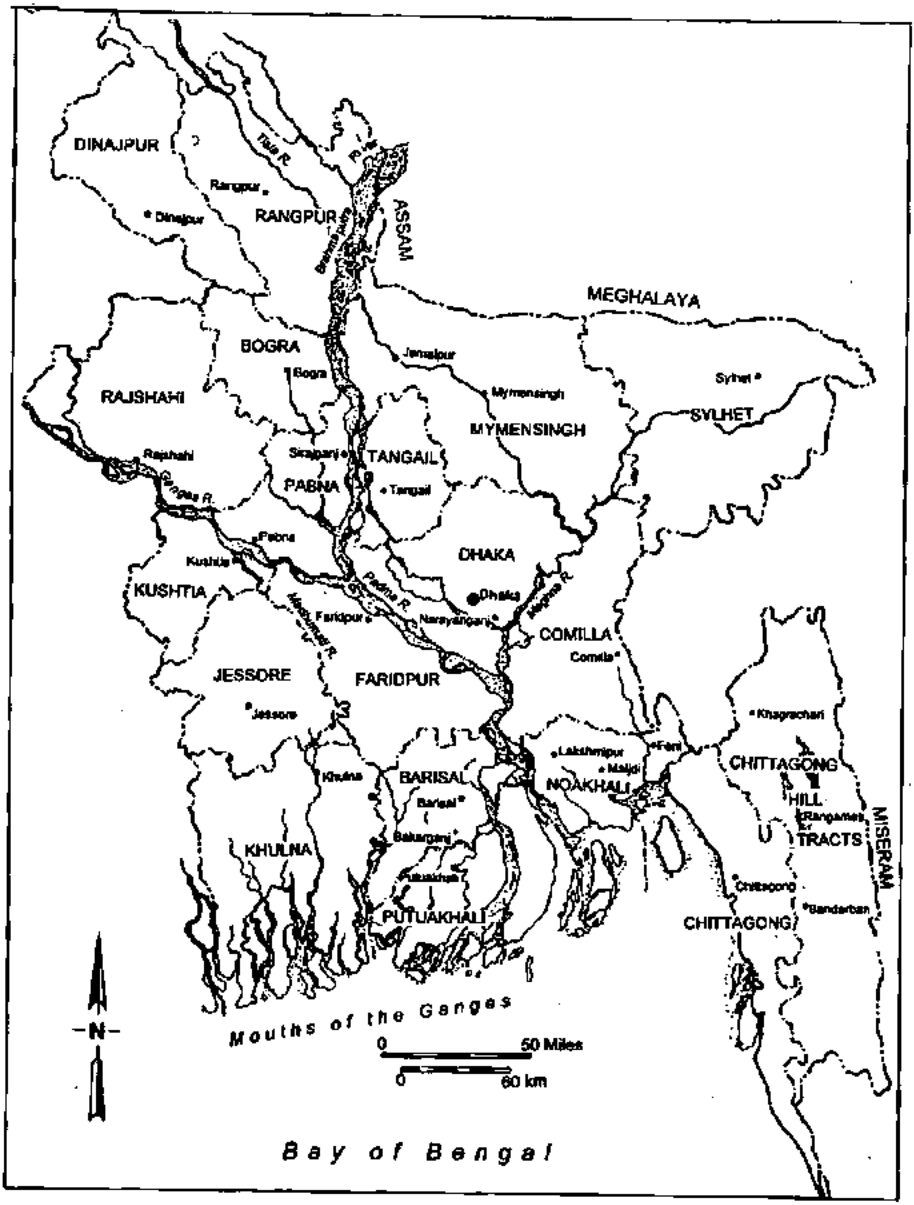
Map 1

Bengal Districts, 1947



Map 2

Bangladesh



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